

# **Early Chinese and Middle-Eastern objects from archeological sites in Thailand reflecting cultural exchange Tarapong Srisuchat**

Thailand is located on the Southeast Asian mainland with its southern and eastern parts adjoining the Andaman and South China seas. This country is a land bridge between the mainland to the north and the archipelagos to the south. Evidence exists reflecting cultural interaction, migration and the settlement of various ethnic groups from time to time.

According to archeological evidence, early settlement in the country can be dated back from the prehistoric period, 40,000 B.P. e.g.. The cave site Tham Rong Rian in Krabi in the South (Anderson, 1986). Later on at a well-known Bronze Age site, Ban Chiang in the Northeast, which is dated 3,000 B.P. a civilized community developed, having a social standard close to that of an early historical state (Charoenwongsa, 1987). A real historical state in which the inhabitants adopted a foreign script and religious concepts was built up around the 1st century B.C.; Indians are considered to be the first foreigners to have made contact with the local people and to have brought to them the attributes of what we consider the historic world.

Legends and historical records indicate that Indians came to Thailand for two main purposes, commerce and the dissemination of their faiths, Buddhism and Hinduism; other navigators such as the Chinese and the Middle Easterners made contact with Thailand later.

While the early interaction between these nations by the sea-route is indisputable, contact with the land route should be considered as well.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the archeological data supporting the hypothesis that Thailand as a land bridge must have been a migration route between the mainland and the Indonesian archipelago. It also must have been a meeting point between travelers on the land route and the sea route.

The similarity of prehistoric implements such as tripods and bronze kettle drums found in the neighboring areas of China, Thailand, the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago is thought to be evidence supporting this hypothesis. In addition, a Kharosthi coin found in central Thailand may constitute evidence of a land route between Northern India and Thailand via Burma.

Regarding the bronze kettle drums found in many parts of Thailand, some are not only similar to those of China in shape but also in conventional functions. Two drums under consideration in this category have the relative dating of c. the 1<sup>st</sup> A.D. -5<sup>th</sup> A.D. (other are undatable). The first was discovered at Nam Rop, Seatthani Province and the second at Khao Sam Kaeo, Chumphorn Province. Each contained bronze figures and beads were buried. In Thailand the concepts of buried bronze kettledrums quite coincides with that of Dian people of Yunnan, who in their Han period tombs treated the drums as grave goods (Von Dewall 1967: 8-21). The bronze figures of these areas are quite distinctive: those on the Dian drums are more elaborate than those two in Thailand. A Nam Rop figure shape like an elephant is similar to a bronze elephant figure found in Yun Kang, China, Northern Wei Period, the 5<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Musée Cernuschi, Paris). The simple but peculiar human and animal figures of Khao Sam Kaeo are not similar to either to the Chinese or to the famous Vietnamese drums of Dong-Son; their primitive shape recalls a Bronze Age site called Malik in Northern Iran which has some similar bronze figures (Musée Guimet, Paris).

As their origins are still controversial, it is hard to justify the hypothesis that the bronze kettledrums found in Thailand are Chinese-made objects. However, their significance lies in their suggesting an interaction over a land route between ethnic groups of the mainland and of Thailand in early historic times.

No historical records exist concerning interactions between China and Thailand in the Han period, but archeological objects have been found in Thailand indicating the entry of the Chinese at that time. A Chinese "spade" coin and three bronze Han mirrors are undoubtedly Chinese-made objects. The single Chinese "spade" coin, found on the eastern coast of the south, has the characteristics of the Wang Mang Period (c. 140-87 B.C.). Regarding the bronze Han mirrors, one was found in Northeast and two in the South Nakhon Si Thammarat and Krabi Provinces. The last was found associated with objects dating to c the 1<sup>st</sup> B.C. AND 2<sup>nd</sup> A.D. when Krabi was a Southeast Asian commercial bead making center and entrepot (Srisuchat, 1989: 4). Thus the Han mirror probably was imported in the Han period by the Chinese, who used the sea route to contact India and other countries instead of the famous desert route.

In short, whether these Han objects came by land or sea, they were trade objects indicating the entry of Chinese influence into Thailand, and perhaps Chinese presence, since the earliest historical period there.

Apart from the Chinese, Middle Easterners, according to recent evidence, should be considered as early foreigners who made contact with Thailand: two peculiar coins found at

Yarang, Pattani Province, made of silver and of gold, show characteristics of Persian coins of the Sassanian period, 500 A.D., exemplifying pre-Islamic objects originating in the Middle East.

No traces of Chinese culture of the 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> A.D. have been found in Thailand in spite of the fact that diplomatic interaction between China and Southeast Asia appears in Chinese historical records.

Beginning from the 7<sup>th</sup> c A.D. inscriptions depicting the glories of Buddhism and Hinduism give evidence about the religious practices adopted by the people suggest a Chinese cultural role; for example, the use of a Chinese flag for a sacred place and the use of ink (probably Chinese made) for writing a religious text. The latter was mentioned in a Pallava-Sanskrit inscription c the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. found in Nakhon Si Thammarat. A Dvaravati votive tablet with Chinese script was found at Sithep which once was an important Buddhist state of central Thailand. Moreover, a small Kuan Yin statuette in the Chinese style of the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century c. A.D. was found at Sathing Phra, Songkhla Province. It appears to have been a portable icon brought by a Chinese pilgrim who landed at that time.

Let us return to the story of the famous Chinese Buddhist monks, Faxian and Xuanzhuang, who made pilgrimages to India across a desert from west to east and return to China via the southern sea route. Such pilgrimages were made by the Chinese for a long time but some pilgrims preferred to use the sea route for the whole journey. This was not because they felt there were more obstacles along the land route, but rather they might have expected to obtain more benefits from the sea trip, such as being able to visit marvelous Buddhist states ;e.g. Srivijaya and Dvaravati, in Southeast Asia. Perhaps Chinese pilgrims who visited Buddhist states in Thailand obtained religious concepts here; a Thai scholar has put forth the opinion that the Chinese monk I-Ching who landed in the Srivijayan state in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. might not have become accomplished in the Buddhist sutras in India, but perhaps obtained his knowledge from the Srivijayan monks during the time spent there (Charoenwongsa 1985: 105-112).

The fact that Middle Easterners landed at an earlier time than the date provided in historical records has recently been confirmed not only by the rather Sassanian coins, but also by Middle Eastern objects of early Islamic times, circa the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., such as terracotta figures, coins and ceramics respectively. The first, found at a brick Buddhist monuments in the Dvaravati town of Khu Bua, Rachtaburi Province, Central Thailand, have been identified as images of Persian traders (Srisuchat, 1989:41); some of the second, generally found in the South, have datable scripts; the latter, sherds with a white clay body

and turquoise blue have been found in many parts of Thailand. Turquoise glazed ware was a popular Middle Eastern ceramic type discovered in Iran and Iraq.

Remarkable material evidence indicating the flow of sea trade between China and the Middle East via the Southeast Asia had appeared at two important ports of the 9<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., Laem Pho and Koh Kho Kao, where a huge amount of early Chinese and Middle Eastern glass and glazed wares have been discovered. Situated on opposite sides of the peninsula, Laem Pho on the east coast and Koh Kho Kao on the west, the two sites are thought to have been important entrepôts connecting China and Middle East.

As a result, the sea route and the advantageous ports solved the problems of transportation of the goods brought and sold along the difficult land route. Moreover, it led to the opening of new markets in Southeast Asia, Africa and the archipelagos of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. It brought about the “Ceramic Road” originating in the east and the “Glass Road” originating in the west. Varieties of Middle East glass which came into the hands of the Chinese caused the development of glass-making techniques in China later on; in the meantime the Chinese were able to offer various types of porcelain to the Middle East. The Middle East used made-to-order Chinese ware, as a Changsa bowl with Arabic script on the bottom found at Laem Pho bears witness. Accordingly, the port was undoubtedly a junction of cultural exchange.

At the time, whatever states the government occupied the ports; it carried out trade and gained profit not only from port taxes but also from the local goods, including prestige goods such as beads which have remained evidence at the site.

It is obvious that commercial beads were produced in Thailand since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. There also appears to be no doubt that technology was imported from India. When Koh Kho Khao became a main port on the western coast in the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., the bead industry was established there, suggesting the use of designs and techniques from the Middle East (Srisuchat, 1989:4).

Chinese imported porcelain of the Tang Period was thought to have been an inspiration to local potters in the Northeastern Thailand in improving their techniques: it appears that a large number of cross draft or slab kilns capable of high firing produced glazed wares known as Khmer or Buri Ram Ceramics were popular in mainland.

There seems to be no doubt about cultural influence from overseas on the aforesaid material context, but some aspects of the cultural connect that appeared in Thailand later need more inquiry. For instance, how did the Sian people (Sian=Siam, the former name of Thailand) mentioned in a Chinese record of the 13<sup>th</sup> c A.D. (Pelliot, 1951) know how to make

silk from the cocoons of silk worms. How did they obtain this knowledge and put it into practice long before these skills were transferred to their neighbors? If the word *brasan*, meaning “market”, which occurs in the first Thai inscription of the Sukhothai Kingdom in the 13<sup>th</sup> c A.D., came from the common Persian word *bazaar*, how did Sukhothai make contact with the Persians? If they used the sea route via the South of Thailand, why there is no trace of the word having been used in the South? Was it possible to make contact by the land route via China?

After the 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D. other foreigners, the Chinese and Middle Easterners, especially the Persians, came to Thailand not only to engage in commerce but also to settle there. In earlier times, they had founded their own communities and behaved as foreigners. Generation after generation, more and more of them became citizens of Thailand. As for the Chinese, due to their similarity to the Thai in many respects, there was considerable intermarriage with the Siamese, and later generations finally became Thai: hence Thai society readily assimilated Chinese culture. In addition, the flexibility of Thais was advantageous to the assimilation of other cultures, even distinctive religious concepts; that is one reason why the Islamic religion, originating in the Middle East, has become widely professed in Thailand without conflict with the Thai way of life.

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