

BOOK REVIEWS



Before Siam: Essays in Art and Archaeology. Nicolas Revire and Stephen A. Murphy, eds. Bangkok: River Books, 2014. 432 pp, 312 color illustrations, 56 maps and plans, Notes, Bibliographies, Index. US \$49.95. ISBN 9786167339412.

Reviewed by Miriam T. STARK, *Department of Anthropology, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa*

The millennium-long period that began c. 500 B.C.E. has long vexed Southeast Asian archaeologists and historians for its odd mix of archaeological, documentary, and art historical data that mark a change from the prehistoric period to one recorded by local and visiting historians. We still struggle to understand this period, called variously the Iron Age, the protohistoric period, the Early Historic period, or simply Early South East Asia (with credit to [Smith and Watson 1979](#)), during which Southeast Asians embraced profound organizational and ideological transformations ([Murphy and Stark 2016](#)). Indianization, Hindicization, localization, Sanskritization: each of these terms captures some elements of settlement, subsistence, and political dynamics of the time. Yet each term reflects an outsider perspective; it is only in the last few decades that archaeologists and art historians have buckled down to do the hard work of understanding the material record of this “millennium-long no-man’s land” from the bottom up ([Manguin 2011:xvi](#)).

Nicolas Revire and Stephen Murphy have done our field a great service by producing this 2014 edited volume, which includes 18 essays by 22 contributors and spans the period from protohistory to the end of the thirteenth century. Hiram Woodward’s prologue surveys current knowledge of Thailand’s proto- and early historical periods. Southeast Asian archaeologists will gravitate toward the chapters that report on recent excavations in central and peninsular Thailand (i.e., Promthin Thai, Phong Tuek [central Thailand], Kamphaeng

Saen; Yarang, Ban Bana, Khuan Mahut [peninsular Thailand]) and points as far west as lower Myanmar and as far north as southern Laos. Some sites are entirely new to the archaeological community; included in this group are the central Thai sites of Kamphaeng Saen and Phromthin Tai (Gallon, Lertcharnit), Pattani sites of Ban Bana and Khuan Mahut (Noonsuk), and Muttama (Martaban, reported by Moore and San Win). In other places such as the Middle Mekong Valley, it is Michel Lorillard’s identification of a broader settlement pattern that is novel. Careful field-based archaeological research, and Hutangkura’s geoarchaeological study of Thai shorelines, in this volume’s chapters help clear the log jam that Karl [Hutterer \(1982:563\)](#) claimed prevented us making substantive linkages between the region’s ‘prehistoric’ and ‘historic’ traditions.

Several of the book’s authors focus on excavated objects to offer essentially new archaeological and art historical research. Ian Glover and Shahnaj Husne Jahan’s analysis of a bronze bowl from Khao Sam Kaeo pinpoints potential new South Asia source areas for technological traditions that mark Thailand’s protohistoric period. Analysis of Mediterranean goods from peninsular Thailand by Borell and colleagues deepen our understanding of the range of goods and routes that linked Southeast Asia with the West. Himanshu Prabha Ray’s discussion of religious maritime linkages across the first-millennium C.E. Bay of Bengal to India’s eastern coast (and Nagarjunakonda [Andhra Pradesh])

expands our knowledge of routes and the South Asian context. These linkages were robust, carrying ideas eastward from a complicated mix of South Asian traditions by the early sixth century. Paul Lavy's carefully-argued analysis of conch-on-hip images in early Vaiṣṇava sculpture not only provides a comprehensive survey of these early images, but also lays a convincing foundation for a sustained indigenous development of Brahmanical art in the region.

A few of the book's chapters interrogate discrete data classes to understand Thailand before Siam. Nicolas Revire's painstaking analysis of Buddhist practice and ritual uses Dvāravatī period inscriptions (Buddhist donation and dedicatory; Pāli citation and Ye Dhammā) from first-millennium Thailand to move between what he calls material and ritual cultures. Pinna Indorf uses Dvāravatī *cakras* as analyzable texts; her seriation organizes these key artifacts through time and across space to understand historical and political events within the Dvāravatī period. Wesley Clark's contextual analysis of burial remains and ritual architecture at Phong Tuek illustrates regional variability within what previously was glossed as a relatively uniform Dvāravatī horizon. Stephen Murphy compares the content and iconography of seventh–eleventh century *sema* stones from lower Myanmar with those from Northeast Thailand to conclude that these were discrete traditions with shared ideological beliefs, rather than a migration event from Northeast Thailand.

The book's last section, entitled, "Later Khmer Impetus," defines the West-East relationship between areas that scholars had previously kept separate (for largely historical reasons). Pia Conti's interpretation of Tantric Buddhism at the eleventh–twelfth century C.E. Prasat Hin Phimai (and possibly pre-eleventh century Tantrism in the region) links the Khorat Plateau more firmly to the expanding Angkorian world. Such work deepens recent Angkorian-area research on Tantrism (e.g., Sharrock 2009, 2012) to encompass the very critical Phimai region at its founding. Miltzer o'Naghten's chapter maps the geographic boundaries of late twelfth/early thirteenth century Angkorian ruler Jayavarman VII's Mahādhara-pura homelands. This discussion of

the late Angkorian empire's western lands (and administrative policies used to control them) merges Dvāravatī and Angkorian worlds to create a more legible map of the period before Sukhothai's emergence.

This edited volume offers historical and archaeological perspectives on the gap period between prehistory and history and enriches our understandings of Dvāravatī. The book's scholars willingly credit and build on work by scholarly pioneers in Dvāravatī studies, including archaeologists (particularly Phasook Indrawooth, Srisak Vallibhotama, and Phuthorn Phumanthorn) and art historians (particularly Pierre Dupont, Dhida Saraya, Horace Geoffrey Quaritch Wales, and Robert Brown). Political agendas play no role in this important new volume. What, finally, does this book – and two generations of Thai archaeological research – teach us about Thailand before Siam? It demonstrates that regionally distinct communities lived and farmed the Chao Phraya and Mun–Chi river valleys for millennia, making and trading goods up and down their riverine systems far beyond Thailand's current nation-state borders. The Mekong River was also one of the region's super-highways. Precisely when Indic ideas reached Southeast Asia, and the identity of these culture bearers, remain matters of extensive debate. What this book offers, however, are abundant insights on what happened after contact and on the millennium during which Southeast Asians made these ideas and iconography their own. Chapters in this book should stimulate the next generation of scholars to blur boundaries and cross national borders as they seek to understand social and ideological dynamics of mainland Southeast Asia's first millennium C.E.

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Ancient China and the Yue: Perceptions and Identities on the Southern Frontier, c. 400 B.C.E.–50 C.E. Erica Brindley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 302 pp, 12 b/w illustrations, 3 maps, 3 tables, Bibliography, Index. US \$103.00. ISBN 9781316355282.

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It is fair to say that substantially more has been written about China's northern neighbors in pre- and early imperial times than about its early southern populations. This is perhaps not surprising, considering the perpetual need of Bronze Age and later dynasties to monitor, engage, and appease those powerful and mobile steppe polities that agitated at their doorstep. In contrast, not only was the south geographically distant from the dynastic centers of the Central Plains, it never emerged as a serious military threat. Textual, archaeological, and linguistic data combine to paint China's vast southern region (from the Yangzi River to northern Vietnam) as a highly segmented ethnic landscape populated by mostly small-scale, pre-literate populations who spoke non-sinitic languages. The absence of any coordinated resistance to – or possibly even awareness of – the southern march of armies is evident from the recorded speed at which China's early empires managed to incorporate the southern regions into their realms. Thus, by 214 B.C.E., Lingnan (consisting of present-day Guangdong and Guangxi) in southeast China had become

part of the Qin empire, while troops dispatched one century later by the Han emperor Wudi are said to have taken no more than 3 years to reach and conquer a vast swath of territory covering present-day Fujian (along the southeast coast), Lingnan, northern and central Vietnam, and portions of Yunnan (in southwest China), all of which were soon partitioned into commanderies and constituent counties.

Viewed from a comfortable historical distance, these early southern campaigns take on the appearance of effortless expansion which laid the foundation for the subsequent political integration and sinicization of China's southern populations. In reality, however, the process of military, administrative, and cultural incorporation was also marked by serious challenges. Contemporary and later texts refer to regular and occasionally successful native uprisings, as well as debates at court regarding the wisdom of administering and holding on to such distant regions. Still, even as historical studies of the south have incorporated into their narratives details of these setbacks and the tasks faced by imperial