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Developing Complex Societies in Southeast Asia: Using Archaeological and Historical Evidence

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A number of archaeologists are making significant advances in the historical archaeology of Southeast Asia. The papers presented in this issue, and the one that preceded it, provide new insights and exciting directions for future research.

KEY WORDS: complex societies; Southeast Asia; chiefdoms; states.

Southeast Asia is today among the most exciting areas for research in historical archaeology. It was the scene of developments ranging from the first world system connecting East Asia to the Mediterranean via the Indian Ocean to the spectacular rise of indigenous states and empires. Interdisciplinary teams with both Southeast Asian and expatriate scholars are bringing the most current archaeological perspectives and methods to bear on these developments. These papers, first presented at a special workshop at the 1997 meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Nashville, but since much discussed and usefully revised, utilize evidence relevant to the rise of hierarchical polities in various parts of Southeast Asia. In some ways, these classes of evidence are incommensurate, and it requires great acumen and sensitivity to use them together in a way that they do not merely test—confirm or disconfirm—each other, but produce constructs of the past richer than can be achieved with either body of evidence alone.

One class of evidence, studied carefully since late in the nineteenth century in Southeast Asia, are the documents which record written messages in linguistic form, and often closely associate artistic representations.

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These are composed at specific points in time and, often, have evidence of specific dates and particular social actors. So far, none of the Southeast Asian cases discussed in these papers have produced internal primary texts, writing used to record day-to-day transactions, such as accounts, letters, or contracts. There is nothing like the cuneiform documents of Ancient Mesopotamia, or the ostraca of the Classical or South Asian worlds, before the colonial era. Instead, documentary specialists have to deal with what may be termed either internal secondary texts—records made by specialists (often serving the interests of elite figures) to convey a particular point of view to others, often messages of religious piety or royal suzerainty—or external secondary texts, written by outsiders who often had little control of local languages and little understanding of what they were seeing, also to convey particular points of view. These surviving written texts always represent specific cultural perspectives. To compound the difficulties of analysts, we know many of these texts through tertiary versions, later and often partial copies, passages selected by later authors for their own reasons.

The other class of evidence, whose systematic study began in Southeast Asia only in the middle years of the twentieth century, a few decades ago, is the material debris of daily life. Such debris is the direct by-product of cultural action. While a particular archaeological sample may result from decades of even centuries of activity and while the individual actors who made, used, and discarded each item are usually anonymous, material debris is a regular by-product of processes such as production, consumption, conflict, and death. However, it proves to be quite difficult to estimate the rates and quantities of such processes because the archaeological record has its own biases. Different by-products are disposed of, sometimes according to cultural rules, in places which can either protect them for archaeologists to find or make it very unlikely that they will be found. After disposal, processes of decay eliminate all but the most durable items from the record. Finally, archaeologists themselves may look only at a biased selection of archaeological localities.

How can two such different kinds of evidence—resulting from different aspects of cultural systems, representing incommensurate spans of time, and selected by completely different modes of preservation—be fruitfully used together? For this author, the answer lies not in the evidence itself, but in the way that it is used. Using one form of evidence simply to confirm the implications of another will necessarily leave scholars knowing less than they did before such comparisons. In fact, such comparison never takes place in a theoretical vacuum. We always look at evidence in terms of assumptions about what it might mean. If these assumptions are made explicit in the form of constructs about past cultural phenomena, and if the implications of such constructs for both longer-term material processes and sym-

bolic structures and shorter term sociopolitical events are evaluated with appropriate forms of data, then we can approach a broader and more profound knowledge of the long-dead past than we can gain from any single source. Let us consider these papers in terms of the kinds of evidence they use and of their evaluation of logical constructs, whether explicit of implicit.

The Dian culture of the late first millennium B.C. in Yunnan, southwestern China, first became known to scholars through the study of Chinese Imperial histories, later supplemented by archaeological excavations of what are believed to be Dian cemeteries. **Francis Allard** appropriately begins his consideration with a basic review of traditional Chinese historiography and of the development of culture historical approaches in Chinese archaeology, which he cogently argues to be complementary to each other. He shows that the documentary sources have to be viewed as tertiary external sources which tell us more about Han frontier policy than about the dynamics of Dian culture. The archaeology, until recently, has focused on spectacular cemetery sites, some of which have been fully excavated and reported. However, though graves and material objects are well described and illustrated, there is little systematic bioanthropology for these cemeteries, limiting the potential of mortuary analysis to elucidate Dian social structure and dynamics. We hope that the next generation of archaeologists in Yunnan will do both more comprehensive cemetery studies and regional survey and settlement studies.

The early historic and pre-Angkorian Khmer polities of the late first millennium B.C. and early first millennium A.D. in the upper Mekong Delta in Cambodia became known to scholars through a century of critical studies of diverse textual corpus and temple remains. **Miriam Stark** begins her consideration with a masterful discussion of the problems posed by both tertiary Chinese accounts of contacts with a polity called "Funan," similar to those discussed by Allard, and by secondary internal texts in both an introduced language, Sanskrit, and a local language, Khmer, sometimes juxtaposed on the same monument. In contrast to this diverse and extensively studied documentary record, political circumstances have delayed the development of systematic archaeology on protohistoric sites in the Mekong Delta until the present decade. Nevertheless, the nascent archaeological record raises one immediate issue. The chronological evidence indicates that large centers were founded at least five centuries before external documents and a millennium before internal documents. The conjoint study of documentary and archaeological sources can inform us about later state dynamics in the Mekong, but only archaeological evidence can be used to evaluate hypotheses about prestate polities and initial state formation. We can only hope that collaboration between Cambodian and Vietnamese pro-

jects will flourish, so that comparable archaeological research will be undertaken in all areas of the lower Mekong region.

The early historic and Khmer cultures of the Mun Valley, a Mekong tributary in northeastern Thailand, is the focus of two papers. Both use a textual record similar to that from the lower Mekong, though less rich. The work of **David Welch** is able to utilize the results of a major intensive archaeological survey by his team, one which recorded settlement patterns ranging in age from prehistoric villages to the post-Khmer collapse phase. In dealing with the Khmer period, Welch constructs a model of provincial political and economic relations based on the texts and on what we know about early states in general and, from this model, deduces propositions about the locations of small farming settlements known only through archaeology. His integration of textual and archaeological evidence provides genuinely new insight into Angkorian state operation. In dealing with the Early Historic period before integration into the Angkor polity, Welch faces both a poverty of texts and problems with the archaeological ceramic chronology used to date surveyed sites, and he is appropriately cautious in proposing or testing organizational models. In contrast, **Charles Higham** is able to utilize the data from both survey and several still ongoing meticulous excavations in the upper Mun Valley. Archaeological evidence collected by his interdisciplinary team shows that, early in the first millennium A.D., increased population, intensified cultivation of rice and herding of cattle, more specialized metalworking and exchange, and more differentiated social statuses probably ascribed. Unfortunately, he does not yet have this kind of record for succeeding cultural phases, and like Welch, he is appropriately cautious in using the limited evidence of texts and temple art in discussing pre-Angkorian polity formation.

The polities of the late first millennium A.D. and early second millennium A.D. in the northwestern Malay Peninsula have been the objects of both textual and archaeological research for at least a century. **Jane Allen** uses the information from an extensive geomorphically informed archaeological survey in the Kedah area to confront some longstanding misuses of textual information in Southeast Asia. For Kedah, there are not only tertiary external Chinese accounts based on the reports of visitors, as in the studies discussed above, but similar South Asian, Arabic, and even Classical sources. These sources make dubious claims for domination of the Malay peninsula by distant polities on the Mekong Delta, Java, and even South Asia. Allen is able to show that what visitors saw were entrepots then on the coast (though now inland) and that there is little evidence for a foreign presence, much less any kind of control, in the hinterlands beyond these coastal centers. The occurrence of imported luxury ceramics and metalwork is most simply explained as a consequence of the emulation of for-

eign lifestyles by Malay elites. Allen ends her discussion with a reanalysis of the geographical text of Claudius Ptolemy and some testable propositions about the location of coastal entrepots of the early first millennium A.D., when East Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean were connected in a vast exchange network.

The polities of the early second millennium A.D. in the central Philippines are known from diverse Chinese and Spanish texts and from several intensive regional archaeological projects. Indigenous texts exist but cannot yet be interpreted. The Chinese texts, based on eleventh- to fifteenth-century visits, have the same problems as those discussed above. The Spanish texts include both secondary external accounts and some church and government records which are primary texts resulting from colonial administration. While taking note of a wide range of current Philippine archaeology, **Laura Junker** focuses on the evidence she herself has thoroughly analyzed from the developing chiefdoms documented by the Bais Archaeological Project, directed by Karl Hutterer on the island of Negros. For this study, she has excellent chronological control, a meticulous intensive survey, and a series of problem-oriented excavations with data on subsistence, craft, trade, housing, and mortuary ritual. After introducing her sources, Junker analyzes each class of documentary evidence in terms of the perspectives of those who recorded it and evaluates both the documentary and the archaeological evidence in terms of general models of the operation of chiefdoms. She finds these general models to be restrictive and suggests useful modifications to take into account the flexibility of structure and rapidity of processual change evident in her Philippine case studies.

All of the papers presented at the Nashville workshop, those that are discussed above and others, are products of incomplete research processes and ongoing efforts to deal with evidence not easily integrated. The authors' efforts clearly delineate future research directions in archaeology. The basic geoarchaeological studies undertaken by Allen and the documentation of past environments presented by Higham should be incorporated into all studies. The value of intensive regional survey, even in tropical environments and in intensely cultivated zones, is richly illustrated by the work of Welch and Junker. This approach should likewise be more widely utilized. The systematic application of bioanthropological techniques to cemeteries, for which Higham and his team is justly famous, should be applied in Yunnan and elsewhere. Though none of these papers focuses on such approaches, it is also the case that improved technical and stylistic analysis of artifacts can help us to deal better with the economic and social issues raised in these papers. It is not only archaeology, however, in which new sources of evidence will be forthcoming. New inscriptions are found

as more sites are excavated or restored in Southeast Asia. New classes of texts may also be found. It is not impossible that even the remains of bamboo or palm leaf documents will be found in wet contexts at sites like Angkor Borei and Oc Eo. New evidence alone, however, will not generate new insight. Critical thought is needed regarding the kinds of societies and cultural transformations developing in Southeast Asia. There is no substitute for careful questioning of assumptions and explicit statement and evaluation of theoretical ideas.

In sum, we have before us a coherent and very thoughtful group of papers, one which gains strength from its focus on a region in which there has long been a critical historiography and in which there is much new and innovative archaeology. Any researcher concerned with understanding the past using both documentary historical and material archaeological sources will profit from reading these papers.