Southeast Asian Prehistory

Studies on the prehistoric period in Southeast Asia have grown in leaps and bounds. Research within the past 20 to 30 years has demonstrated that the region occupies an important place in the study of origins and development of agriculture and metal-working on a worldwide scale.

The geographical area which constituted prehistoric Southeast Asia extends beyond what most commonly consider the postcolonial territorial extent of Southeast Asian nations. It would have included Yunnan and Lingnan and parts of eastern India. The southern regions of what constitute the modern state of China today shared and still continue to share many affinities with the Southeast Asian region, environmentally, linguistically, and in terms of customs and traditional practices.

Prehistory in Southeast Asia can be divided into the following sequence: Palaeolithic, [Mesolithic], Neolithic, Bronze, and Iron Ages. The term “Mesolithic” is rarely used in the Southeast Asian context; in Europe, the Mesolithic Age refers to the period when people made the transition from hunting and gathering to village farming, and this can be observed in the adoption of new tools used for food production. In Southeast Asia, scholars working on the prehistoric period observe no transitional period between the Palaeolithic when the earliest hominid fossils were dated to and the Neolithic when prehistoric human populations became sedentary agriculturalists.

Trinil, Central Java, is an example of a Lower Palaeolithic site where W.E.B. DuBois found the first example of a hominid skull, named “Java Man” in 1891.

A possible reason why “Mesolithic” is not commonly used in the Southeast Asian context is the lack of research done on sites from the period when scholars can make inferences regarding the relationship between tools and adaptation to the natural environment. Research until 50 years ago was based on assumptions about tools such as axes and adzes, and agricultural practices. In the last 20 to 30 years, few sites have been discovered which date from the critical transitional period of 10,000 to 5,000 years ago.
Debates on the origins of agriculture have continued, and these are unlikely to challenge the thesis that domestication of rice began in river delta regions with the Yangzi River valley being one of the earliest, if not the earliest loci of rice domestication.

This argument depends on the correctness of the thesis that domesticated rice varieties, such as Oryza sativa indica and Oryza sativa japonica, are derived from a single wild rice variety: Oryza rufipogon. Other data favor the independent evolution of rice domestication and more fluid movements of rice varieties across the fertile agricultural landscape of Southeast Asia (inclusive of the Yunnan and Lingnan regions).

With the adoption of sedentary agriculture and the proliferation of village communities, social complexity increased, observed in agricultural practices, technology and industry, customs and traditions including religious practices. Late prehistoric societies engaged in primary and secondary burial practices.

Burials with hoards of personal items of varying value indicative of social differentiation and stratification of these societies were common during the Neolithic period. In earlier prehistoric societies, social stratification is less distinct and grave sites and burial assemblages are less differentiated than in later societies. Pottery and stone beads and other lithic artifacts are commonly found in such assemblages, but in Bronze- and Iron-age societies, metal implements were added. Greater differentiation between the amount of wealth found in offerings in burials indicates that the deceased people were from different social strata.

The Bronze Age began around 1,500 BCE and Iron Age around 500 BCE. However one must caution that one cannot conclusively argue that Neolithic communities are less socially differentiated than Bronze and Iron Age societies based on the assessment of burial goods and such artifacts; other features such as positioning of the bodies and location of individual graves in comparison to one another are important evidence. It is also important for scholars to avoid an inherent tendency to historicize the development and relationships between prehistoric societies from the Palaeolithic to the Iron Age: this refers to the tendency to see the latter societies as inevitably more advanced and evolved than those of the previous era.
Stone tools represent one important source of information regarding human evolution, not only in the physical sense, but also socially and technologically. In comparison to tools found in prehistoric Europe, Southeast Asian stone tools from the Palaeolithic appear to be highly undifferentiated and crude and unwieldy; this was the initial view of many early observers who came across these tools.

In contrast to the variety of European style stone tools which includes bifacial hand axes and stone knives, the Southeast Asian tools comprise largely flakes, choppers, and cleavers. One of the earliest sites in Southeast Asia where stone tools were found in association with hominid fossils is Sangiran in Central Java.

The site dates between 2 million and 200,000 years ago. While it cannot be conclusively argued that the stone tools were already in use during the earlier stages of the occupation at Sangiran, a group of the hominids must have been using the tools at some point during the long time span. Stone tools have similarly been found in other sites in Indonesia including the Pacitan industry (devoid of hominid fossils), and Flores.

Stone tools have also been recovered from prehistoric sites in the Malay Peninsula, such as the burial site at Gua Cha, Kelantan, where the tools found are choppers, flakes, and adzes. The site is approximately 4,000 years old, and the presence of stone adzes suggests that the people were using them for clearing land for agriculture, and hence, beginning a sedentary lifestyle. Stone tools were found at Tanjung Bunga, Johor and Tanjung Karang, Singapore (near Tuas) in the late 19th century; they are also about 4,000 years old, thus indicating a Neolithic population once lived on Singapore.
Very little is known about the prehistory of Cambodia; another country in the region which shares this same predicament is Burma/Myanmar. Research in Cambodia both during the colonial period and since the country emerged from the Khmer Rouge period has focused on the major monuments, particularly the main temple complexes and networks of roads and water features of Angkor. In the 1990s and 2000s, researchers began to explore the regions beyond Angkor, such as Angkor Borei, Sambor Prei Kuk, Kompong Svay, and prehistoric sites around Phnom Penh. However to this day, it is Angkor which still draws the largest number of research teams. Prehistory in Cambodia remains an understudied subject, where few individual researchers and even less funding are committed to the study of prehistoric sites.

Despite the increased amount of research interest in Cambodia, the chronology and classification of sites within the country inclusive of many interesting sites outside Angkor remain problematic. The greatest threat, however, is not the lack of funding and balance in research foci, but the age-old problem of looting and illegal trade in antiquities. The problem is not restricted to Cambodian antiquity, but also concerns looting and trafficking of artifacts mainly from burials and other religious reliquaries in neighboring countries, such as Burma/Myanmar and Indonesia. The images presented here show the activities of looters at a prehistoric burial site in Doun Nouy village, Banteay Meanchey province, in Cambodia, about 15 years ago. The site appeared to consist of burials dating to the Bronze-Iron Age containing human bones and bronze jewelry and implements.
Gold represents one of four types of metal often offered as grave goods; the other three are silver, bronze, and iron. Gold, when it does occur in burials, clearly reflects wealth and the elevated status of the deceased. Examples of gold burial objects include the face masks and orifice covers which were used in various areas in the island Southeast Asian region ranging from Indonesia to the Philippines.
Gold also appears as prehistoric burial offerings in mainland Southeast Asia, with examples found in Vietnam (Giong Lon, for instance) and Cambodia (Prohear). A team led by Andreas Reinecke and his Khmer counterparts found 79 gold and silver objects in 52 burials from Prohear. There were also two ring fragments found outside burial contexts, and an additional 15 items which were known only from photographs as these were looted and sold before the team arrived. Finding gold objects in Cambodia is not surprising as a 13th-century historical account written by Zhou Daguan, who was sent by the Yuan dynasty as an emissary to the Angkor court described common women wearing “gold bracelets” and “gold rings”.

Gold mask found in a burial, Giong Lon, Southern Vietnam.
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An assortment of gold jewelry excavated from different burials in Prohear, Cambodia.
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The skeletal remains of a male between the ages of 20 and 29 buried with various funerary items, such as glass earrings, bronze bracelets, and iron tools in Prohear, Cambodia.
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