

WORKING TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THAI PREHISTORY: CURRENT RESEARCH ON THE POST-PLEISTOCENE

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INTRODUCTION

Although Thai archaeology is relatively young in comparison with European or North American archaeology, I find current research very exciting. Over the past three decades both Thai and foreign archaeologists have provided new empirical data for various areas of research; for instance, the transition from the upper Pleistocene to early Holocene (Anderson 1990; Pookajorn 1991), early domestication and the development of agriculture (Gorman 1971, 1977; White 1982; Higham 1989a), early metallurgy (Suchitta 1983; Piggott and Natapintu 1988; Bennett 1990; Nitta 1991; Pigott *et al.* 1992), prehistoric exchange (Welch 1985; Natapintu 1986; Higham 1989b; Welch and McNeill 1991), the development of complex societies (Macdonald 1980; Bayard 1984, 1992; Higham 1989b, 1991; Thosarat 1989), state formation (Vallibhotama 1984; Glover *et al.* 1992, Mudar 1992), ethnoecology (White 1989) and ethnoarchaeology (Suchitta 1980; Pookajorn 1991). In addition, there is progress in fieldwork procedures and analytical techniques such as faunal analysis (Higham 1975a; Kijngam 1979), petrographic analysis (Vincent 1988; Fine Arts Department 1991a; White *et al.* 1991), pollen analysis (Maloney 1991, 1992; Wattanasak 1991), phytolith analysis (Keahofer 1992), macro-floral analysis (Yen 1977; Pyramarn 1989; Thompson 1992), geomorphology (Sinsakul 1992), lithic analysis (Fine Arts Department 1991b), human osteology (Wiriyaom 1984; Tayles 1992) and spatial analysis (Higham *et al.* 1982). These new discoveries have had direct impact on reconstructions of regional prehistory (Bellwood 1985; Higham 1989a), as well as contributing to broadly comparative archaeological and anthropological research elsewhere in the world (e.g., Flannery 1973; Shorer and Ashmore 1987; Wenke 1990; Price and Feinman 1993). Archaeo-

logical research in Thailand can be seen as the direct result of developments in the discipline as a whole.

At the same time, I feel frustrated because Thai as well as Southeast Asian archaeology still has relatively low visibility in the world archaeological community (e.g., Hutterer 1982a; Junker 1993). In an editorial entitled "Early Metallurgy, Trade and Urban Centres in Thailand and Southeast Asia", Ian Glover rightly states that:

...it is probably true to say that of the densely populated parts of the world, Southeast Asia remains archaeologically the least known, and new research there has had far less impact on the awareness of the general public in the West, and of the international academic community, than research taken in, for example, the Near East, China, and Mesopotamia over the same period (Glover *et al.* 1992:7).

Though we have made progress in establishing cultural chronologies, especially in northeastern Thailand (Bayard 1984; Higham 1989a; White 1990), other areas remain little known. It is clear that we still have only a fragmentary picture of Thai prehistory. We continue to emphasize site oriented research, with a particular focus on large sites such as cemeteries and workshops, and data-oriented research. Sophisticated field and laboratory techniques are being applied to the artifacts in the hope that some useful results will emerge. Moreover, there is a heavy emphasis on issues of classification and chronology, with little attention paid to the cultural context of archaeological materials. Only a few research projects endeavor to address specific theoretical issues of cultural process (e.g., Bayard 1984; Higham *et al.* 1982; Macdonald 1980; Welch 1985; Wilen 1987). As a field archaeologist, I do not mean to imply that building chronology is not important. It is, of course, one of the most

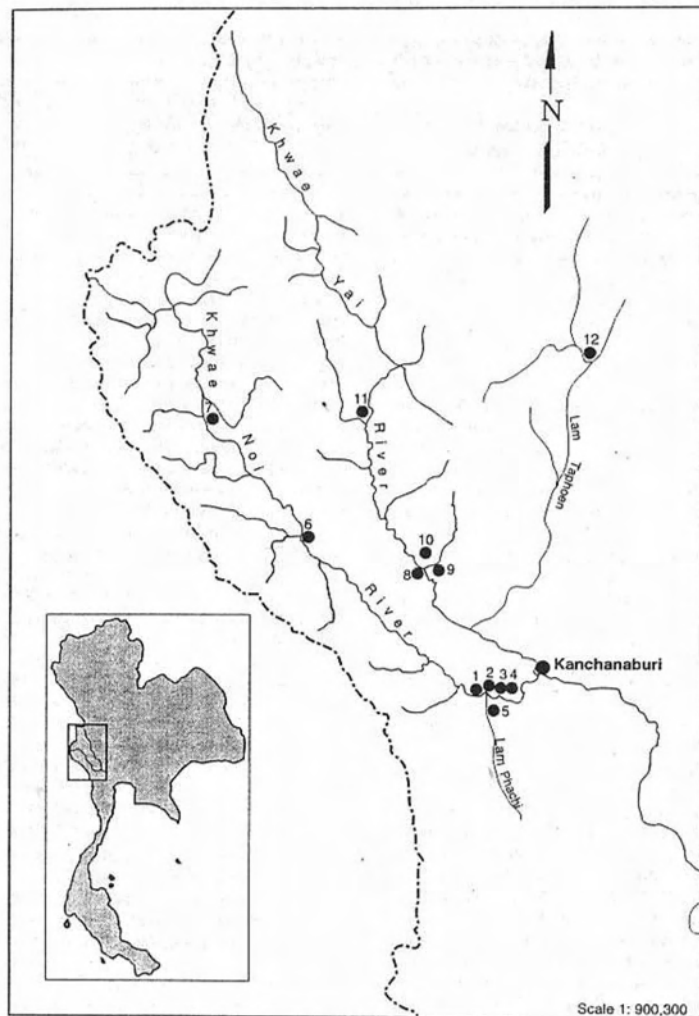


Figure 1: Location of the research area in the Lower Khwae Noi valley, Kanchanaburi Province, western Thailand. 1) Ban Kao, 2) Tatu and Heap caves, 3) Sane cave, 4) Lang Kamnan cave, 5) Rai Arnon, 6) Kao cave, 7) Sai Yok cave, 8) Chande cave, 9) Kang Chine, 10) Han Songchram, 11) Khao Sam Liam cave, 12) Ongbah cave and 13) Don Noi.

important archaeological research goals, but at the same time we must pursue archaeology's other goals: reconstructing extinct cultural systems and explaining past cultural processes (Binford 1968). From the available empirical data, it is clear that only a few projects have pursued problem-oriented research from a variety of theoretical orientations. To some extent, cultural chronologies and past lifeways are well enough understood in a general sense, while explaining the process of cultural development has received much less attention among archaeologists. In order to translate our data into the generally meaningful social reality behind the artifacts we deal with, we must adopt an anthropological perspective. Nevertheless, efforts to move Southeast Asian archaeology from a culture-historical (e.g., migration, diffusion) to an anthropological emphasis have only recently received attention (Hutterer 1982a; Junker 1993).

This paper, therefore, attempts to synthesize and examine the available information from an anthropological perspective. First, I provide an overview of the concept of anthropological archaeology. Second, I discuss problems in Thai prehistory viewed with an anthropological emphasis. Finally, the archaeological research from western Thailand will be presented as a case study (Figure 1).

WHAT IS ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARCHAEOLOGY?

Since anthropological perspectives may have different meanings to different archaeologists, I wish to define it here. Contemporary American archaeology, for instance, includes diverse schools of thought which present a variety of theoretical orientations (Thomas 1990; Trigger 1989). Two major anthropological schools of thought can be characterized: the ideational approach focuses on the mentalistic, symbolic, and ideological and the adaptation approach focuses on cultural materialism including technology, ecology, economics, and demography (Thomas 1990:108-129; see Meltzer *et al.* 1986 and Renfrew and Bahn 1989 for an overview). As I have stated, the majority of Thai and other Southeast Asian as well as foreign archaeologists have been effected by mainstream western contemporary archaeology, though many times we do not even know what is the logical reasoning behind the theories and methods we apply to our area and where they come from.

Let me be more specific regarding the term "anthropological archeology". The most explicit definition, perhaps, is given by Robert Whallon (1982a) as follows

Anthropological archaeology aims primarily to explain the organization, operation, and evolution of human cultural systems. ...[it] is undeniably and inextricably linked to a great number of other disciplines in the social and biological sciences, which either study the same phenomena among contemporary, living human groups or examine strictly analogous phenomena of organization and evolution in other species, either contemporaneously or paleontologically. As a consequence, anthropological archaeology must share a wide range of theoretical and methodological concerns with these other disciplines, and it is entirely expectable, therefore, that there will be a significant degree of overlap among theoretical and methodological foundations of all these related sciences, archaeology included. ...anthropological archaeology seeks to explain a number of phenomena that also are studied by other social sciences, the subjects of interest in these cases being, in fact, identical. Here the differences among disciplines lie, rather, in archaeology's long-term time perspective on evolutionary processes, or in the anthropological emphasis upon a holistic view of human cultures, as well as the obvious differences occasioned by the nature of the primary empirical data available to the different disciplines (Whallon 1982a:1-3).

Moreover, anthropological archaeologists develop models and methodological procedures to explain and identify past human behavior and material correlates using various sources of cross-cultural comparative data such as the ethnographic record (e.g., Schott 1986; Kelly 1992), ethnohistory (e.g., Marcus 1989), ethnoarchaeology (e.g., Longacre and Skibo 1994), experimental archaeology (e.g., Mauldin and Amick 1989) as well as borrowing techniques and perspectives from other disciplines.

I consider archaeology as a part of the discipline of anthropology and take a holistic view of culture. Anthropology encompasses the entire human experience, including ideology, subsistence economy, technology, social organization, and so on. I believe that a holistic view of culture is essential to structure archaeological research and explanations of the past. The ultimate goal of anthropological archaeology is to explain the total range of cultural similarities and differences, and explain processes of cultural change (Binford 1972; Whallon 1982a, 1982b). Explanation is defined as follows

...something of more general significance and applicability. It covers the specific data at hand as a case in which certain general principles, processes, variables,

