

THE RING-DITCH BURIALS OF NORTHWESTERN THAILAND AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

Recent archaeological study of sites in the uplands of northwestern Thailand has indicated the presence of socially complex cultures which were interacting with lowland centres from as early as the 5th century AD. Sites of monumental ring-ditch burials have been found to have been heavily looted. Further research on their significance will require techniques appropriate to disturbed sites.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of complex society in mainland Southeast Asia is traditionally viewed as a development of agrarian-based cultures of the lowland plains (e.g. Higham 1989). However, this is only part of the story, as more data come to light concerning the interrelationships between lowland centres and groups occupying adjacent upland hill-tracts (e.g. Sørensen and Hatting 1967; Sørensen 1988; Glover 1985; Pitiphat 1992). Recent archaeological study of sites in the uplands of northwestern Thailand affirms that they contain abundant evidence of socially complex cultures and extensive interaction with lowland centres from as early as the fifth century AD. Burial monuments, abandoned settlements and associated ceramics are the principal evidence of successive upland occupations in the pre-modern period.

The lowland so-called "Indianised states" of the protohistoric and historical periods have dominated historical and archaeological research in Southeast Asia (e.g. Taylor 1992; Legge 1992). Contemporary developments in the uplands of Thailand have received comparatively little systematic historical or archaeological attention.

Published research consists largely of anecdotal accounts and some preliminary survey work (e.g. Hutchinson 1939; Kauffmann 1971; Condominas 1990). One excavation has been undertaken in the Tak-Maesot area (Pitiphat, pers. comm.) and several summaries of existing knowledge of the history and archaeology of the hill-tracts of northwestern Thailand have been produced (e.g. Satyawadhna 1992, Appendix C; Brown 1988: 4-6; Shaw 1988, Appendix A; Renard 1981).

Looting of burial sites from the Tak-Maesot area in the mid 1980s and later in the north around Omkoi has provided evidence of extensive involvement of upland groups in the international and regional exchange systems of adjacent lowland centres in the historical period (Rau and Hughes 1985; Shaw 1986: 1-17; Vallibhotama 1987). The widespread occurrence of trade ceramics in upland areas, well established as a marker of direct trade and exchange in insular Southeast Asia (Bronson 1977: 39-52; Junker 1990: 167-209), has yet to be studied in any detail in mainland contexts (cf. Welch 1989). Preliminary work on surface sherds indicates distinct distribution patterns that may relate to the trade and exchange networks of regional lowland centres (Shaw 1988). However, our understanding of the relationship between the ceramics and the impact of regional exchange on contemporary upland groups is critically dependent on specific details of the association between site and surface assemblage.

In the following I would like to discuss the results of a survey of burial sites carried out in February and March 1993 along the northwestern border area of Thailand. Three considerations prompted the survey. The first was the large quantities of trade ceramics attributed to the burials of this area. The second was the speculation surrounding the nature of the burial sites. The third was an

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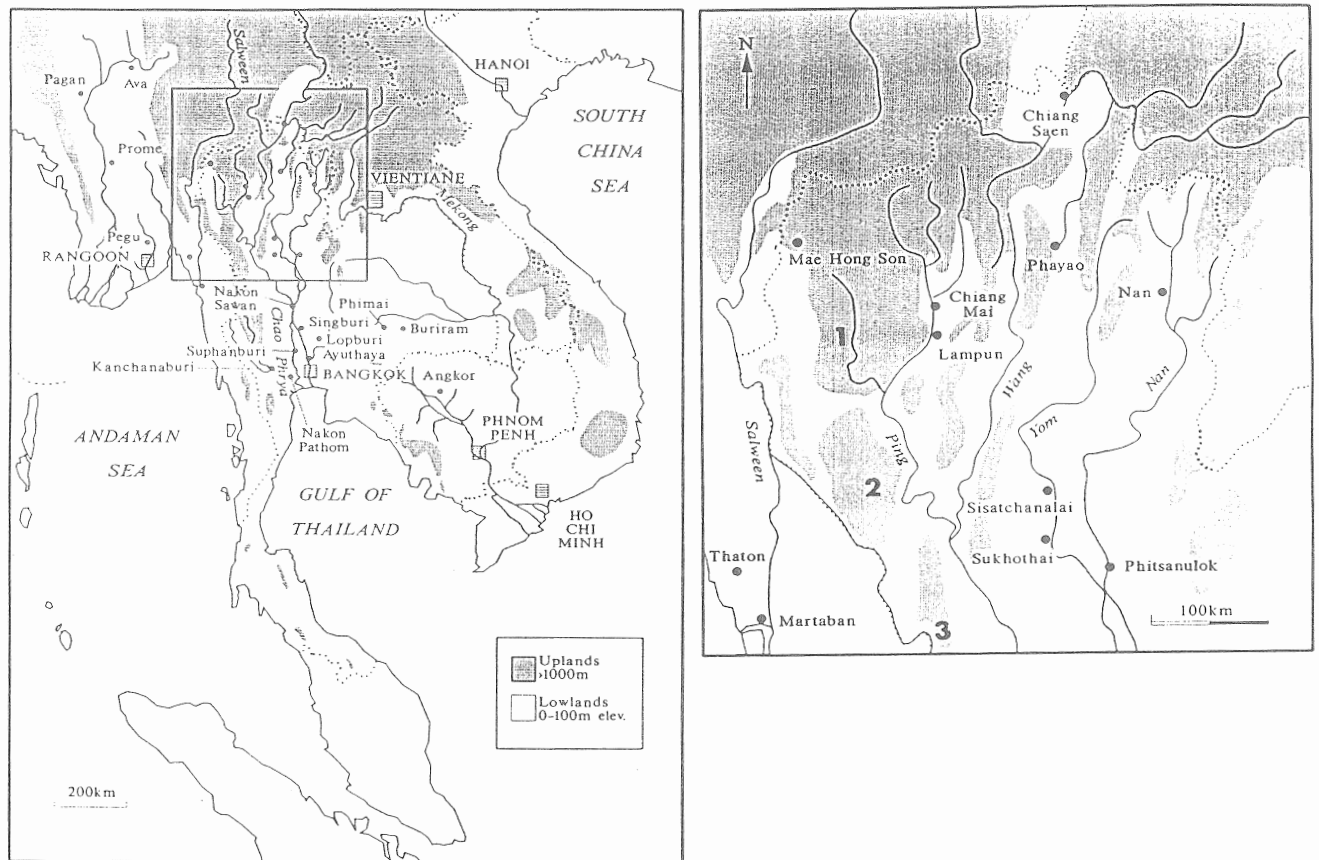


Figure 1: Map to show survey region and located sites

ignorance of the way regional exchange worked in relation to this phenomenon.

SURVEY OF BURIAL SITES

I set out to document a sample of upland burial sites over a region extending from Mae Hongson province to Umphang. The success of the survey was entirely due to extensive knowledge and cooperation of local hilltribes people in each area visited. Extending from Mae Hong Son to Umphang the survey located four sites relevant to this discussion (Figure 1). Common to each are circular earthworks with evidence of extensive looting and the remains of broken and discarded ceramics. Three of the four sites included trade ceramics that could be identified with Thai, Burmese, Vietnamese and Chinese production centres.

Prior to the survey, the location of 16 burial sites with trade wares in the region was known, but the first earth-

work burial recorded in any detail was by the historian George Condominas in 1958 during a field trip (Condominas 1990). This site, in a western tributary of the Mae Chaem Valley, was interpreted as a fortification with surrounding ditch and embankment. While it was more or less circular, Condominas thought that it had originally been square. His local informants called it a Lawa tomb and the small pit dug out of the centre suggests that this site had already been explored by the late 1950s.

The survey located an earthwork of about the same dimensions in a western tributary of the Mae Chaem valley (Figure 1, area 1). This was the most northerly of the ring-ditch burials located. The Ban Mae Satop site, named after a local Karen village, is circular with an overall diameter of 14 metres. It consists of a central flat area raised about 50 centimetres and surrounded by a shallow ditch and low embankment. At the centre of the

flat topped raised area was a freshly dug pit about 1.5 metres deep. Local informants believed that diggers had been there about three months before but had not recovered any ceramics with the exception of local hand made wares. Digging is said to have stopped when human bones were uncovered at the bottom of the pit. The apparent freshness of the pit, the location of fragments of a hand made bowl next to the earthworks and the absence of any other sherds appeared to support this account.

Further south again around Omkoi two sites, each marked by several circular earthworks, were located less than a kilometre apart along a ridge between the Karen village of Ban Sop Lan and Omkoi (Figure 1, area 2). Both consist of simple circular flat-topped mounds as well as large ring-ditch earthworks similar in form to the Ban Mae Satop site, but up to 30 metres in diameter. Local informants indicated that many other similar sites were located in the area. Extensive pitting of the mounds and adjacent areas marks the intensive activity of looters. Virtually no tradeware sherds were found associated with the ring-ditch earthworks. Most sherds occurred around pits dug into the smaller flat-topped mounds. At Ban Sop Lan 2 (Figure 1, area 2), the greatest number of sherds was found in a small area between the burials and the adjacent dirt road and comprised a range of glazed and unglazed wares, many of which were evidently of Thai, Burmese or Chinese origin. Like the burials, this area had been extensively dug over but there was evidence to suggest that digging occurred after the deposit had been exposed by road works.

The most southerly site surveyed is located along the road connecting Mae Sot and Umphang at kilometre 84 on a low, gently sloping ridge on the eastern side of a small upland valley (Figure 1, area 3). Like the Ban Sop Lan sites the Ban Umphiang Sii Khao site consists of a cluster of circular earthworks all extensively pitted by looting and is one of many in the region. The site contained the largest ring-ditch mound encountered during the survey with an overall diameter of approximately 50 metres and a circular area (25 metres diameter) levelled and built up 3 metres (Figure 2). The raised area is encompassed by a U-shaped ditch 9 metres wide from the perimeter of the inner circle to the top of the surrounding embankment. Several less impressive raised mounds, varying from 10 to 25 metres in diameter, were located in the immediate vicinity. Very few sherds were found associated with any of the earthworks. A large quantity of tradeware sherds, however, was located over 70 metres north of the earthworks beside a walking track. They occurred in a small area that had been extensively dug over. Here sherds were scattered both on the surface and

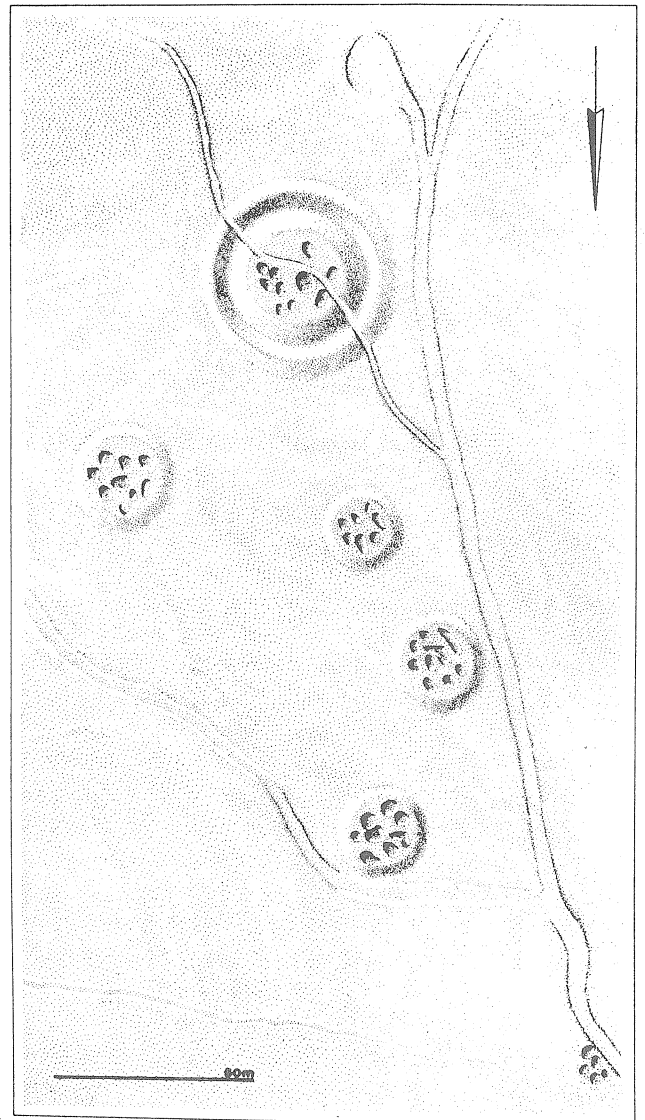


Figure 2: The Ban Umphiang Sii Khao site

exposed in the sides of diggers' pits. The trade ceramics included Chinese blue and white, Burmese lead glazed wares and a few small fragments of a distinctive type of decorated earthenware flask. Predominant, however, are 15th and 16th century glazed and unglazed bowls and jars from the Thai production sites of Sawankhalok and Sukhothai.

The results of a compositional analysis of the ceramics from each of the survey sites will be dealt with in detail elsewhere. In summary a clear distinction is evident in the ceramic profile of the sites at Omkoi and Mae

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Chaem on one hand, and Tak and Umphiang on the other. Against a background of Chinese celadon and underpainted porcelains, Burmese lead glazed wares and a range of unattributed jar fragments, Thai wares predominate. At the Omkoi/Mae Chaem burial sites these are largely from the northern Thai centres of Kalong and Sankamphaeng. At the Tak/Umphiang burial sites decorated wares from the northern central production centres at Sawankhalok and Sukhothai are most common.

The origins and cultural affiliations of the ring-ditch burials are obscure and further complicated by looting. The concentration of sherds in small areas away from the burial mounds at Ban Sop Lan 2 and Umphiang suggested that diggers at these sites first brought finds to a central area before discarding fragmentary vessels. Secondary scavenging of the discard pile was also evident at one of the Omkoi sites (Ban Sop Lan 2). The absence of imported ceramics at some of the earthwork burials, (e.g. the Ban Mae Satop site of area 1) is problematic because of the possibility of total looting with sorting and discard occurring elsewhere. There is some evidence to suggest that the practice predates the introduction of tradewares. Calibrated ^{14}C dates for wood preserved in the hafts of two stylistically similar spear heads collected from burial sites in Tak province are AD 900-1000 and 1050-1300 (radiocarbon dates: 1122 ± 79 , 832 ± 110 BP). The dated spear heads indicate continuities in mortuary practice and weaponry from a period prior to the introduction of trade wares at about AD 1200 (e.g. Pitiphat 1992).

While circular earthworks have been noted, monumental ring-ditch burials have not been reported elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Arguments that all circular earthworks in Southeast Asia are comparable to the ring-ditch burials of the Thanon Thongchai uplands and reflect the cultural practices of the same or similar groups (Satyawadhna 1992), have yet to be demonstrated. The replacement of older Indianized Mon-Khmer groups occupying both uplands and lowlands in northwestern Thailand by Tai in the lowlands around the twelfth century AD (Tambiah 1976) provides some historical context for the distinction between upland and lowland burial practices. The growth of wet rice agriculture with its requirement of level paddy fields, predominant in the Southeast Asian lowlands throughout the historical period (Stargaardt 1986), may be a factor in the apparent absence of ring-ditch burials from lowland contexts. Lowland polities and supporting communities reliant on wet rice agriculture would also have employed Buddhist mortuary ceremonies where cremated remains were rarely preserved. However, the absence of modern parallels for some of the burial types has contributed to a lack

of consensus about the groups responsible and their possible original extent. The likely interplay between upland geography and the instability inherent in upland societies further complicates the association of particular groups with a specific cultural practice (e.g. Leach 1964).

Oral history provides an important source of evidence for the relationship between the ring ditch burials and modern upland groups of the area. A distinctive burial type with upright stone markers is associated with tradewares and, until earlier this century, continued in use among Lua upland groups. The oral histories of these groups also indicate continuous occupation of the uplands over several hundred years and complement the archaeological evidence for continuity in this burial practice. Claims that monumental earthwork burials occur later than the sixteenth century AD (Condominas 1990) are not supported by any oral traditions of the uplands. Large earthwork burials reported in the Wa States of eastern Burma similarly belong to a burial practice beyond the oral history of groups in the area (Scott and Hardiman 1900: 514).

It seems that the practice of ring-ditch burial in the uplands did not continue into the early modern period. The apparent disappearance of the groups responsible for constructing the ring-ditch burials may be related to warfare between competing lowland centres. Like the collapse of ceramic production at Sawankhalok this would fit with a date around the middle of the sixteenth century AD. At about this time Bayinnaung (1551-81) of the Burman Dynasty of Toungoo included Chiang Mai and Ayutthaya in what one historian has called "one of the strongest empires Southeast Asia has known" (Reid 1993: 210).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The earthwork burials extend over several hundred kilometres of the uplands and provide clear evidence of strongly localised exchange patterns with adjacent lowland centres. However, there is evidence to suggest that "ring-ditch burial" groups were occupying the uplands before the advent of this exchange. The imprecise relationship between many of the burial mounds and ceramics allows two equally plausible interpretative frameworks, each well grounded in archaeological theory.

In one interpretative framework, the burial monuments of Omkoi and Umphiang are treated as more or less contemporary with the ceramics found in the vicinity. Occupation by groups associated with ring-ditch burials is shifting but continuous from a pre-trade ceramic period. Accelerated exchange with lowland centres and its impact on the organisation of upland groups is reflected

in differences in the scale of the monuments. In this framework relative differences in the scale of burials reflect the status of the groups or individuals commemorated. This in turn is one of the impacts of exchange with the lowlands (e.g. Foster 1977; Wells 1987; Kipp and Schortmann 1989).

In the second framework, monuments at the same site may be separated by several hundred years. The evidence of the ring-ditch burial without trade ceramics indicates that as a type it belongs to an earlier pre-trade period. The smaller mounds with trade ceramics in close proximity to ring-ditch types could represent either the emulation of the larger more complex monuments or reuse of less monumental forms of the same basic pre-trade type. This is reminiscent of the documented post-Roman reuse of burial tumuli in Europe and of arguments that they reflect resistance by non-Christian to Christian elites (Van de Noort 1993; Bradley 1987). If a similar time lag exists between the burials of the western Thai uplands then the revival or maintenance of local monumental forms of burial rites suggests a deliberate appropriation by upland groups. As such the ring-ditch burials provided both a model and auspicious location for the construction of the smaller adjacent mounds contemporary with tradewares.

The emulation and reuse of prehistoric burial sites would both affirm connection with local cultural traditions and represent resistance to the ideological and political ambitions of Buddhist lowland polities (Tambiah 1976, Hagesteijn 1989). Generally, Buddhist remains in the Thanon Thongchai uplands are without date but the recovery of over 500 Buddhist reliquaries and late Ming imported ceramics (AD 1522-1644) east of Omkoi in the area of the King Bhumiphol Dam have been claimed as evidence of comparatively relatively late occupation by Buddhist groups (Chandavij 1985:85). The ring-ditch burials of the adjacent areas provide a direct contrast as permanent, distinctly non-Buddhist monuments.

The Hmong walking tracks through the Ban Umphiang Sii Khao site underline the fact that ring-ditch burials of the Thanon Thongchai hills now belong to an obsolete symbolic landscape. The results of the survey simply confirm that these distinctive burial sites represent a monumental statement of a vanished social order. Clearly the groups responsible played an integral part in local and regional social and political interactions of the historical period in mainland Southeast Asia. The task now remains to substantiate the significance of the monumental ring ditch burials of northwestern Thailand through the development and application of techniques appropriate to the disturbed nature of these sites.

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