

THE PRACTICE OF JAR BURIAL IN THE MUN AND CHI VALLEYS

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ABSTRACT

Jar burial practices have been reported from northeastern Thailand, dating from the late prehistoric period. The mortuary arrangements and associated grave goods have much in common with those of similar sites in insular Southeast Asia.

OVERVIEW OF JAR BURIAL IN ASIA

Jar burial cultures are characterised mainly by the practice of burying the dead either complete with flesh (primary burial) or as defleshed bones (secondary burial) inside jars. Jar burial has been reported from Japan, Taiwan, China, Indochina, Borneo and Indonesia, as well as from India. In the latter region, the Chalcolithic people of the Deccan and Tapti valley practised inhumation burial of selected bones in urns. These urns were covered with bowls placed upright or inverted. Adults and adolescents were also buried full length in double mouth-to-mouth large jars placed horizontally (Rao 1966).

The practice of jar burial was prevalent throughout Southeast Asia in prehistoric times. In some parts of Indonesia (especially Java, Sumba, Sulawesi and Maluku), primary and secondary jar burials can be dated back to the Early Metal Age, commencing possibly 500 BC. In the Philippines and Sarawak, archaeological evidence indicates that jar burial sites, either open air or cave, date from the late Neolithic, beginning by at least 1000 BC. In many of these regions the practice of jar burial continued until after European contact. Pottery vessels, stone or iron implements, and glass beads or bracelets are usually found as funerary gifts, while during the Period of Contact and Trade (12th to 16th centuries

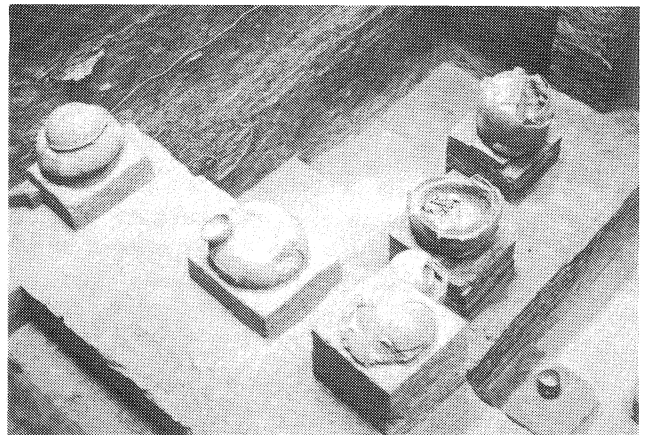


Figure 1: Jar burials at Ban Kan Luang, Ubon Ratchathani Province

AD) the important associated finds are porcelain and stoneware (Dizon 1979; Fox 1970; Solheim 1960).

Jar burial has been recently practised by some indigenous groups in the Philippines and Borneo. A minority group in Sarawak, the Kelabit from the northwestern part of Borneo, observed jar burial customs in this century. The process consisted of primary burial in a wooden coffin, followed by secondary burial in an earthen jar (Chin 1980).

JAR BURIAL IN THAILAND

In Thailand, jar burials date from the late prehistoric period to the 11th century AD. Secondary jar burial sites are reported from the Mun and Chi valleys in the northeastern part of the country. They are usually

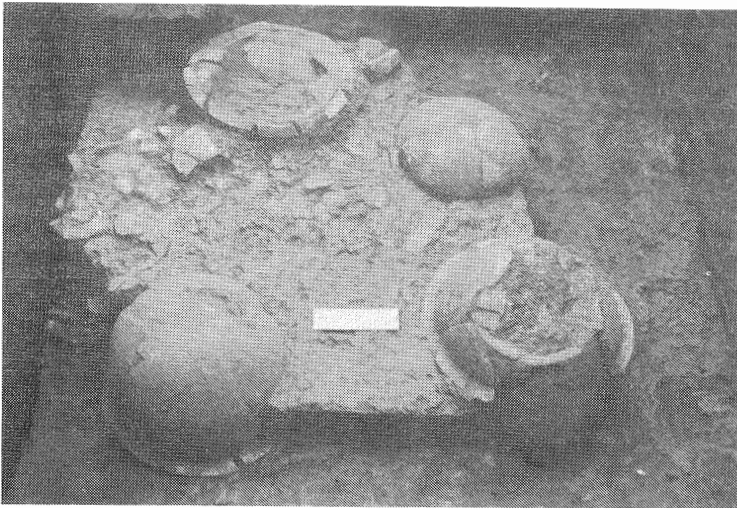


Figure 2: Jar burials at Muang Fa Daed Song Yang, Kalasin Province

situated on mounds surrounded by moats and ramparts. Large quantities of iron slag, indicative of the iron smelting process during the Iron Age, starting from the 5th-3rd centuries BC, have been found. Recently, systematic excavations of some jar burial sites have been conducted.

From the excavations at Ban Kan Luang in Ubon Ratchathani Province (Fig. 1); at Ban Krabuang Nok in Nakhon Ratchasima Province (Mun Valley); and at Muang Fa Daed Song Yang in Karasin Province (Chi Valley, Fig. 2), we find that the contents of the jars, apart from human skulls and long bones, are pottery vessels, glass beads, iron implements, and bronze ornaments in the form of bells, rings and bracelets. The jars are usually buried in groups, from two to ten in number. A human skull and long bones will be found within one jar, while another might contain funerary gifts or offerings of food for the dead (Indrawooth *et al.* 1989).

The jars unearthed in these sites are from 40 to 90 cms in height (Figs 3 and 4) and range from crudely baked, earthen cylinders with round bottoms to finely baked pottery with a corded pattern on the lower part of the vessel. The jars were covered with bowls placed upright or inverted. It can be observed that the categories of associated funerary gifts, such as pottery vessels, beads, stone or metal implements, and ornaments, are similar to those placed with the dead by contemporary jar

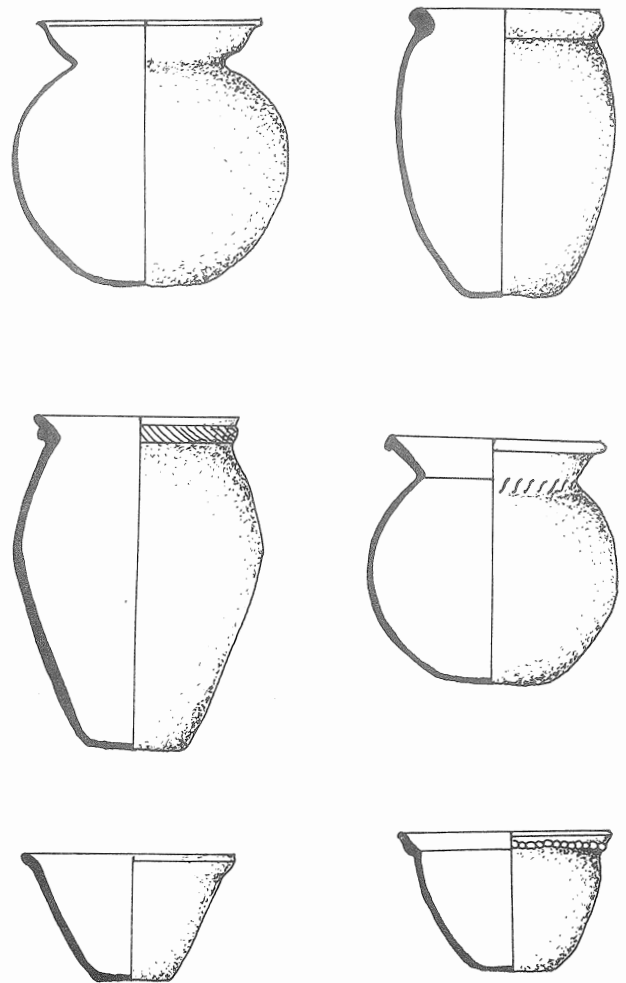


Figure 3: Burial jars (no scale provided) from Ban Krabuang Nok, Nakhon Ratchasima Province

burial cultures elsewhere in mainland Asia and the archipelago.

Besides secondary burials, traces of primary burial have been noticed from the excavation at Ban Krabuang Nok (Mun Valley). A group of large jars 70 cm high, with 30 cm high bowls sealed on their tops as covers, was unearthed. Inside these jars, complete human skeletons were interred (Fig. 5).

During the proto-historic period (c. 8th to 11th centuries AD), Buddhism was introduced to the Mun and Chi valleys from the Chao Phraya Valley. A number of Buddhist communities appeared, located mostly in the Chi Valley, as seen by the remains of Buddhist architecture (brick *stupa* bases of Dvaravati style) and

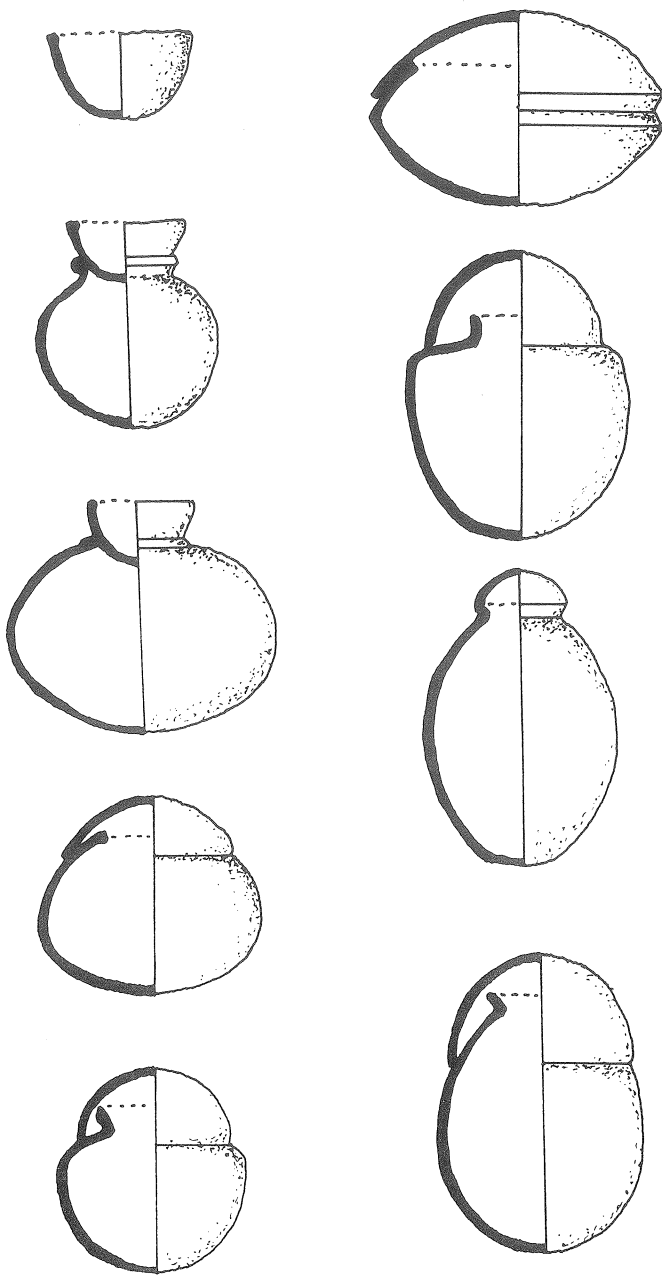


Figure 4: Burial jars with lids (no scale provided) from Ban Kan Luang

sculpture (Buddhist images of Dvaravati style). However, these communities continued to practise secondary jar burials up to the 10th-11th centuries AD. Traces of cremation burials dating from the 12th-13th centuries AD onwards, when Mahayana Buddhism penetrated from

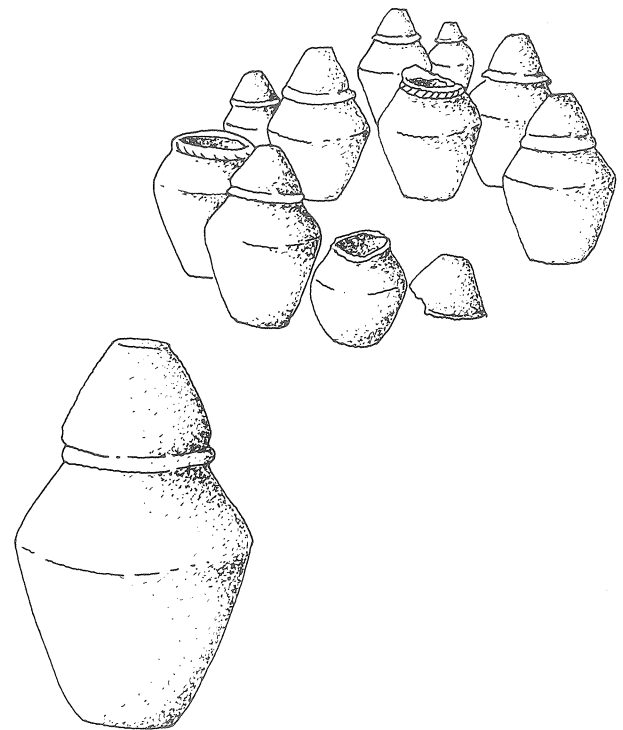


Figure 5: Group of primary burial jars excavated at Ban Krabuang Nok

Cambodia, have also been found in the Mun and Chi valleys.

Jar burial culture, as one kind of mortuary ritual, is a source of information on socio-cultural aspects in the life of a particular group of people. As is known, all mortuary rituals are motivated by fear of the deceased person's spirit or soul. They are an attempt to control the actions of the ghosts of the dead (Jocano 1970: Tenazas 1985). Secondary burial, known in the Philippines as bone-washing, is a practice in which the body is buried, then recovered and buried a second time after the bones have been washed. The communities who practise secondary burial generally regard the ancestral bones as the abode of the ancestral spirits. The family's fortune depends on the careful observance of the ritual. Sickness among family members is caused by burying a kinsman in the wrong place (Jocano 1970). This concept can also be related to the jar burial culture in mainland Asia and in the archipelago.

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