

# ZOOMORPHIC SPOUTS FROM CENTRAL THAILAND

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## ABSTRACT

*The archaeological site of Promtin Tai in Lopburi Province, central Thailand, is a multi-activity site occupied over the course of several hundred years. The site has been excavated successively by the author since 2004, yielding evidence for various activities ranging from habitation and mortuary rites to copper smelting and probably trading. The chronology of the site has been dated using stratigraphic information and cultural materials; absolute dating samples have been collected and sent for dating, but results have yet been reported from the laboratory. Archaeologically, the site represents a community with strong evidence of early long distance trade and cultural contact with India and developed from an Iron Age village to early historic town.*

## INTRODUCTION

The archaeological site of Promtin Tai in Lopburi Province, central Thailand (Figure 1), is a multi-activity site occupied over the course of several hundred years, spanning the late prehistoric to early and later historic periods (see Lertcharnrit 2006; Srichai 1991). The site has been excavated successively by the author since 2004, yielding evidence for various activities ranging from habitation and mortuary rites to copper smelting and probably trading (Lertcharnrit 2006). The chronology of the site has been dated using stratigraphic information and cultural materials; absolute dating samples have been collected and sent for dating, but results have yet been reported from the laboratory. Archaeologically, the site represents a community with strong evidence of early long distance trade and cultural contact with India and developed from an Iron Age village to early historic town. It is one amongst a relatively small number of large early historic settlements in central Thailand that potentially provide an insight into the emergence of early complex and state-level society in Thailand and Southeast Asia (see Mudar 1999; O'Reilly 2007).

There is still much to discuss and further investigate about the site, as a large number of artifacts have been unearthed during the past five years of archaeological research there. However, this paper focuses on an uncommon class of artifacts, the zoomorphic spouts found during the 2007 excavation. These spouts were found in a habitation layer dating roughly to the Dvaravati period (ca. 6<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) based on assemblage content. The Dvaravati context lies above the Iron Age context, and it is composed of artifact classes that are characteristic of the Dvaravati period, including carinated pots, silver coins, spouted pot, clay coins, and small, round glass beads. It should be noted that Dvaravati culture is generally characterized as a culture strongly influenced by Indian ideology as expressed in religious and artistic material remains, as well as settlement pattern with moats and earthen walls (Indrawooth 2005; Saisingh 2004). The site of Promtin Tai yields a multitude of artifactual remains typical of this Dvaravati culture assemblage. It is also a moated town measuring approximately 700 by 800 meters (Wanasin and Supajanya 1981), and serves as a center of Dvaravati communities in a lowland area at the time (Mudar 1999). Accordingly and remarkably, excavations at the site by the author have unearthed a relatively large number of spouts of varying shapes and forms; one of the forms is a group of zoomorphic spouts—an uncommon type of spouts found at Dvaravati sites in Thailand.

## SPOUTED VESSELS

Spouts are part of a distinctive kind of vessel widely known as *kendi*, “ritual water pot,” or “sprinkler” (Phasook Indrawooth, personal communication, 2010). Most scholars who specialize in earthenware ceramics call spouted vessels “*kendi*,” the Malay term borrowed from the Sanskrit word “*Kundi*,” which literally means “water pot” (e.g. Adhyatman 1987; Khoo 1991). Spouted pots have a long history of use, beginning in prehistoric periods and continuing into modern times, and have been found across the world. The origin of



*Figure 1. Map of major Dvaravati sites in north-central Thailand.*

the spouted pot form is largely speculative, and it is possible that they were first produced somewhere either in South Asia or Southeast Asia (Rooney 2003).

In Southeast Asia, archaeologists have mostly uncovered spouted pots from early historic sites, both in mainland and island Southeast Asia, including Burma (Stargardt 1990), Cambodia (Stark 2000), Malaysia (Khoo 1991), Thailand (Indrawooth 1985, 2004), Vietnam (Tan 2003), Indonesia (McKinnon 2003), and the Philippines (Main and Fox 1982). Although early spouted vessels in Southeast Asia vary in style, color, and form (e.g. Mundardjito et al. 2003: Figure 9.2; Rooney 2003), most of them do share one notable characteristic: they are made of fine-grained clay or have a fine paste (Indrawooth 1985; Stark 2003). This has led to speculation that early spouted pots might have been made at a few particular production centers and then distributed across the region (Indrawooth 1985). However, a number of orange earthenware spouts made of coarse-grained paste have been uncovered (Figure 2) from recent excavations by the author

at Promtin Tai in central Thailand, together with fine-textured buff spouts (Figure 3). The color (orange) and coarse texture of the spouts are similar to those of other types of local vessels found at the site, suggesting the co-existence of non-local and local production of this type of ceramic vessel, which is a common phenomenon at Dvaravati sites across central Thailand.

In Thailand, archaeological evidence suggests that spouted pots were probably first made during the Late Prehistoric period, no later than approximately 500 BC, at the time of early contact with India (Bellina and Glover 2004; Surapol Natapintu, personal communication, 2010). It is apparent from the archaeology, however, that these earthenware vessels gained the greatest popularity during the Dvaravati period, and they are considered one of the diagnostic artifacts of this period (e.g. Indrawooth 1985). While there is no doubt that spouted pots were commonly used in Dvaravati communities, their function is still poorly known. They could have been used as pouring vessels in a religious ritual as seen in



Figure 2. A coarse-grained earthenware spout from Promtin Tai.



Figure 3. Common Dvaravati spouts from Promtin Tai.



Figure 4. A hamsa-shaped spout from Promtin Tai (side view).

India (Coomaraswamy and Kershaw 1928-1929); conversely these pots could have had a role as part of the domestic life of the Dvaravati people, since they have been normally found in habitation contexts. Spouted pots continued to be used after Dvaravati during the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Rattanakosin periods (Rooney 1987; Spinks 1978). However, most post-Dvaravati spouted pots are glazed stoneware vessels, and some are made of metals, such as bronze, silver, and brass (see e.g. Rooney 2003).

It should be noted that complete Late Prehistoric and Early Historic spouted vessels are rare; they have been mostly found in broken or fragmentary condition. The part of the vessel that has been most commonly found in archaeological assemblages is the spout. The spouts of early vessels that have been unearthed from archaeological sites in Southeast



Figure 5. A hamsa-shaped spout from Promtin Tai (front view).

Asia come in a wide variety of geometric forms with and without decoration, including conical, globular, and S-shape (e.g. Tan 2003: IV-3). They also vary in length.

#### ZOOMORPHIC SPOUTS FROM PROMTIN TAI

The 2007 excavation at the site of Promtin Tai yielded a substantial number of spouts of varying forms, including geometric and zoomorphic spouts. The most common spouts found are geometric examples made of fired clay, while only three zoomorphic spouts were found. The zoomorphic spouts found during the 2007 excavated at Promtin Tai include two *naga* (serpent)-shaped spouts and one *hamsa* (goose)-shaped spout.

Based on stratigraphic data, the *hamsa*-shaped spout is relatively older than the *naga*-shape spouts. It was found in a



Figure 6. A naga-shaped spout from Promtin Tai (front view).



Figure 7. A naga-shaped spout from Promtin Tai (side view).



Figure 8. Fragment of a naga-shaped spout from Promtin Tai.

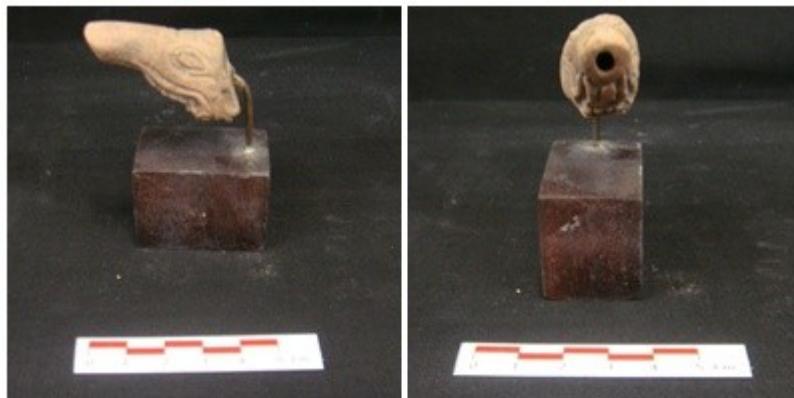


Figure 9. A zoomorphic spout from U-Thong.

domestic context in the Iron Age layer together with other artifactual and ecofactual remains including ceramic sherds, stone beads, spindle whorls and animal bones. The piece comes in the form of the head of the mythical bird with two eyes and a beak (Figures 4 and 5). The maximum length of the spout is about five centimeters and the beak is 1.5 centimeters long. It is made of fine-grained clay, with a burnished, red-colored surface (yellowish red when measured with the Munsell Soil Color Charts - 5 YR 5/6).

The two *naga*-shaped spouts were unearthed in the upper stratigraphic layer dating to the Dvaravati period. Like the *hamsa*-shaped spout, they were found in association with household refuse in a habitation area of the site, including animal bones, glass beads, potsherds, and fresh-water shell remains. One of the pieces is easily identified as a *naga* because it clearly exhibits characteristics of a cobra, such as an expanded hood (about 5.5 centimeters wide) and hood marks below the head (Figures 6 and 7). The hole of the spout is 4.5 centimeters long, and is equivalent to the length of the spout. The other piece is broken and, even though the head and the mouth are missing (Figure 8), it is identifiable on the basis of the presence of strips on the neck and an expanded hood. Both pieces are made of fine-grained clay with reddish brown surface color (when measured with standard Munsell Soil Color Charts).

Comparative information from other sites is very limited. A spout, in the form of *makara* (Figure 9), has been reported in the collection of the national museum at U-Thong. It was found at that ancient town, a Dvaravati site in west-central Thailand, but the context of discovery is unknown. To date, Promtin Tai is the only early historic site where multiple examples of zoomorphic spouts are known to have been found in controlled excavations.

## CONCLUSION

The zoomorphic spouts discussed above came from well-documented provenances and well-defined contexts, and are

among the rarest spout forms found thus far in Southeast Asia. As for the late Iron Age *hamsa*-shaped spout, it appears that this piece is one of the earliest zoomorphic spouts yet found in Southeast Asia. Although there are spouted pots or *kendis* found in Thailand made in the overall form of a *hamsa* (sacred goose), all of these are younger than the Iron Age, and most of them postdate the Dvaravati period (e.g. Guerin and Oenen 2005; Rooney 2003). The two animals (*naga* and *hamsa*) are significant symbols in both Buddhism and Hinduism; the *naga* has been worshiped by several indigenous Hindu groups in India and Nepal as a sacred ancestral animal (Majupuria 1991:182-191), while *hamsa* has numerous significant meanings to Buddhists and Hindus, such as the symbol of knowledge, the symbol of the beginning of new life, and the symbol of creation (Majupuria 1991:178-180). Therefore, the zoomorphic spouts at Promtin Tai suggest the importance and function of spouted vessels as religious and ritual objects even in daily domestic contexts in the early historic communities in Southeast Asia in general and in central Thailand in particular. Finally, it would be interesting to see the complete form of the vessels with zoomorphic spouts, in the case that they are different in form from examples with “common” or non-zoomorphic spouts.

The incidence of zoomorphic spouts at Promtin Tai apparently suggests that the site was an important Dvaravati community, serving as a regional center of the “Dvaravati Kingdom”, as this uncommon and exotic type of spouts might have been used by special and prestigious persons, or religious leaders in the community. The iconographic data of the spouts confirm the strong general Indian influence on local/indigenous people in Southeast Asia during the early historic period, and supports the argument that a relationship between South Asia and Southeast Asia was well-established.

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