

# 'HILL OF PROSPERITY': STATE-OF-THE-ART OF THE PUBLICATION OF KHOK CHAROEN SITE, LOPBURI PROVINCE, THAILAND

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper, a mixture of personal account and scholarly report, endeavours to briefly show how and in what specific archaeological circumstances the Thai-British Archaeological Expedition (1965-70) came into being, how the work on its three sites was carried out and how it was published and integrated into the body of knowledge of the prehistoric archaeology of Mainland South-east Asia, with particular reference to the most important of these sites, Khok Charoen. In a suitably apologetic manner the circumstances are explained which led to this site not yet having been published in full and efforts are described to remedy this regrettable situation in the near future.*

## INTRODUCTION

It is by now commonplace to point out that Thailand, once the Cinderella of Southeast Asian prehistoric research, has developed within not much more than a generation into arguably the archaeologically best-known country in the region. But this pioneering research by Thai and foreign archaeologists was by no means plain sailing. In spite of spectacular advances in our knowledge of the prehistoric archaeology of this central part of Mainland Southeast Asia and its relations with other parts of Asia, there were also some equally spectacular misinterpretations and explorations of blind alleys, to the detriment of our understanding of world archaeology as a whole.

Needless to emphasise that much of this insecurity with regard to the interpretation of excavation results came from the fact that, in these early years, not only

were there hardly any Thai archaeologists trained in modern excavation methods but also that most of those *farangs* (Westerners) who came to the Kingdom to explore it archaeologically in collaboration with their ill-equipped Thai colleagues, while bursting with enthusiasm and technical know-how, had no or very little knowledge of and experience in local conditions in terms of geography and geology or indeed history, culture and customs. Some scientific dating methods, moreover, were still in their infancy and needed great care in their handling. It is a measure of the considerable good will displayed by Thai authorities, colleagues and the common people in the countryside that, in spite of these handicaps and numerous *faux pas* by us *farangs*, we have arrived at this (on the whole) satisfactory situation in which a formerly almost blank spot on the archaeological map now abounds with names of sites which are known the world over, albeit in some cases for the wrong reasons.

However, the role of foreigners in the archaeological exploration of Thailand has recently come under critical scrutiny, first at a conference at Silpakorn University in 1991 and then, as an answer to it, in a very perceptive article published two years later (Glover 1993). One of the sins Western archaeologists have sometimes been accused of is to have taken the results of their excavations out of the country and to have dragged their feet in publication and returning this "cultural property" to Thailand. As I have to admit to being one of those sinners, I wish to take this opportunity to plead mitigating circumstances and to promise speedy reparation.

## WHO DUG WHAT IN THAILAND IN THE 1960S?

After a long hiatus in archaeological research in South-east Asia, due to upheavals created by the War, the first

foreign country to get involved in this research in Thailand was Denmark. At first sight this may look strange but it is easily understood in the light of the close relationship which developed between the two kingdoms from the middle of the nineteenth century on. In his far-sighted efforts to modernise Siam without compromising its existence as an independent state, King Mongkut invited Danish specialists into the country in greater numbers than the relative unimportance and distance of small Denmark would seem to have warranted. But in colonial terms, Denmark was not threatening and Siam was in no danger of becoming another Greenland.

Thus, in 1959, plans were made to organise a Thai-Danish Prehistoric Expedition, i.e. a joint venture of Thai and Danish institutions in order "to make a study of the almost unknown prehistory of Thailand" (Nielsen 1967: 13). It was that basic! As the primary area of investigation, Kanchanaburi Province, adjacent to Burma, was chosen because it was here that H.R. van Heekeren, while working on the infamous "Railroad of Death", had unearthed the first prehistoric finds anywhere in Thailand since the discoveries of Fritz Sarasin in the early 1930s (van Heekeren 1948). Three of these finds, pebble choppers of Lower Palaeolithic age, were seen by van Heekeren as representative of the "Fingnoian" industry which was in turn incorporated by H.L. Movius (1948: 404-406) in his Chopper/Chopping-Tool Complex and was further investigated by Karl G. Heider just prior to the beginning of the Danish expedition (Heider 1957, 1960).

Although having the immediate aim of following up work done in Palaeolithic archaeology by examining sites along the Kwae Noi and Kwae Yai, this expedition also excavated sites of other archaeological periods. The expedition's sites can be classified as follows: 1) the Sai Yok sites (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, Historic) (van Heekeren and Knuth 1967); 2) the Ban Kao sites (Neolithic, Iron Age) (Sørensen 1974a; Sørensen and Hatting 1967); and 3) Ongbah Cave (Bronze-Iron Age) (Sørensen 1974b, 1979, 1988). This first Thai-Danish Prehistoric Expedition, which thus covered all prehistoric periods within a restricted geographical area, was followed, in 1965-66, by a second expedition concentrating on the last-mentioned Ongbah Cave with its rich finds of boat burials, bronze kettledrums and iron implements.

While the first Danish expedition was in preparation, another archaeological project initiated by foreigners was also in the making, concerning the eastern part of Thailand. It was prompted by the realisation that the entire Lower Mekong region, very little known archaeologically, was to be upgraded economically to raise the living

standard of the riparian populations in Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. In 1957 the Committee for Co-ordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin was set up to look into the building of reservoirs, power plants, locks, canals and barrages between Luang Prabang in Laos and the delta area in Vietnam. This would, of course, involve large-scale flooding endangering archaeological sites. Thus an Archaeological Salvage Program had to be initiated as a matter of the utmost urgency (Solheim and Hackenberg 1961). This, then, developed into the "University of Hawaii — Fine Arts Department Expedition" (later "The Fine Arts Department of Thailand — University of Hawaii Archaeological Salvage Program in Northeastern Thailand") which had its first field session in 1963-64, conducting site surveys in wide areas of the Northeast and eventually focusing on a particular site which was to make history: Non Nok Tha, a Bronze Age burial site, about 80 km northwest of Khon Kaen (Solheim and Gorman 1966).

The site was first located by Chester Gorman in 1964 while surveying the western end of the proposed Nam Phong Reservoir and was originally designated "Nam Phong 7". As it is situated near the village Ban Nadi, Amphoe Phu Wiang, it was also occasionally referred to as Ban Nadi or Ban Na Di site, which is rather unfortunate as a site of that name was later (1980-81) excavated near the famous Ban Chiang, to set the latter "in its broader perspective" (Kijngam 1984: 36). Care must thus be taken not to confound these two sites. However, the local name of the small mound on which the major excavation took place, Non Nok Tha, was eventually adopted as the name of this important site.

Excavations at Non Nok Tha began in 1965 and continued into 1966, with the astonishing result that bronze was said to have been worked there at about 2300 BC, which would mean "nearly one thousand years before it is now considered to have begun in Shang China and one hundred years earlier than it started in the Harappa Culture of the Indus Valley in India" (Solheim 1968: 62). A follow-up excavation at Non Nok Tha was conducted by Donn Bayard in 1968 (Bayard 1972a, 1972b). The definite report of the Non Nok Tha excavations still awaits publication.

The rest, as the saying goes, is History. But this history must be briefly summarised here, not only because of its bearing on the interpretation of the finds from Khok Charoen site (see below) but also because certain misconceptions originating in Non Nok Tha are being carried over into the present.

The dates for early bronze, soon apparently confirmed by those from Ban Chiang, were at the beginning of a

drastic "reworking" of world prehistory with special reference to the origin of metallurgy. Reports were, in addition to articles in professional journals (e.g. Solheim 1967, 1968, 1969, 1972b), also published in the press, in magazines (e.g. Alsop 1975; Honan 1975; Schiller 1980; Solheim 1971) and even on TV. Through these media, literally tens if not hundreds of millions of readers were made to believe that the origin of bronze technology, and therefore the "Cradle of Civilisation", was in Northeastern Thailand rather than in Western Asia as traditionally thought. The very few dissenting voices, published only in professional publications (Loofs 1974a, 1979a; Loofs-Wissowa 1980a: 35-36, 1983, 1992, 1993; Marschall 1974: 80-83), were never heard. Even the article by the initiator of all this reworking and rethinking, in which he admits the ill-foundedness of the 4th, 5th or even 6th millennium BC dates for bronze in Thailand (Solheim 1984), did not make an appreciable impact on public opinion, as the society of the journal in which it was published had a membership of only about 250! So little in fact that in some leading museums in the western world — and that includes the Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney — Ban Chiang painted pottery and bronzes are to this day labelled as dating from the 4th millennium BC!

Unfortunately, over these exciting developments with regard to early bronze at Non Nok Tha, another interesting and important aspect of this site was very much neglected: its beautifully decorated pottery. While the enormously rich funeral pottery of this site was eventually categorised and analysed (Bayard 1977, 1984), the nature of the decoration of some of these pots was seemingly kept as a secret. Only three or four decorated pots have been published in sufficient detail that their incised decoration can be compared with that of pots from other sites; they are said to come from the lowest level of the excavation and to be 5000 years old (Solheim 1971: 331, 1972a: pl. 1c, 1972b: 41, 1980: 51). Two different styles of this incised decoration can nevertheless be distinguished: an angular one, and a more rounded spiralic one (Loofs-Wissowa 1993: 45). Almost identical pots of the former category have been excavated at Khok Charoen site, where they were found to be only about 3000 years old, while these in turn were likened by Solheim (1972b: 41) to pottery excavated by himself in the Philippines some years earlier and then thought to be about 2000 years old. This suggested, even then, that something might have gone wrong with the dating at Non Nok Tha.

Three more foreign-initiated archaeological ventures in Thailand in the 1960s must be mentioned, although they do not seem to have influenced archaeological thinking of the time as much as the two large-scale ex-

peditions just discussed. A French archaeological mission, under the directorship of the late art historian Prof. Jean Boisselier, investigated in 1964-66 the antecedents of the Indianized kingdom of Dvāravatī by excavating sites of ancient monuments in the area of U-Thong, Suphanburi Province, believed to have been its capital (Boisselier 1965, 1966, 1969, 1972). A mission from the University of Pennsylvania, headed by George Dales and Bennett Bronson, pursued similar concerns a little further north by excavating the site of Chansen, Nakhon Sawan Province, in 1968 and 1969 (Bronson 1976, 1979; Bronson and Dales 1973). And at the very end of the decade, in 1969-70, a Thai-New Zealand expedition set out to investigate the valley of the Lam Dom Noi, then under threat of inundation, but was diverted to Roi Et and Khon Kaen Provinces which also presented considerable archaeological potential (Higham and Parker n.d.). One of the excavated sites, Non Nong Chik, inside the Phu Wiang monadnock, yielded particularly interesting data which seem to have prompted Higham to get more involved in Bronze Age research, leading to his extensive excavations at the above-mentioned site of Ban Na Di and eventually to his general survey of the archaeology of the wider region (Higham 1989).

Amongst the many surveys and excavations carried out by Thai scholars during the 1960s (but rarely published), the Lopburi Army Camp site should be singled out here as of particular significance. This Late Metal Age burial site, also known by the name of Lopburi Artillery site, yielded iron artifacts at a time when no such objects were known from anywhere else in the Kingdom (Chin 1965).

#### THE THAI-BRITISH ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPEDITION

It was in this confusing and yet stimulating archaeological climate that the idea of a British archaeological expedition was conceived in the hope of reducing some of the confusion, while not scaling down in any way the general excitement. Memories of the "traditional" friendship between Britain and Siam may also have played a role.

The expedition was founded in 1965, with William Watson, then Assistant Keeper of Oriental Antiquities in the British Museum, as the prime mover. It was planned for five seasons to be conducted in the first two or three (rainless) months of 1966 to 1970. Its objective was the gaining of information on the obscure period preceding the establishment of the first Indianized states in Mainland Southeast Asia, by investigating the Late Neolithic period and the spread of the use of metals in the area. It

was — and still is — indeed something of a mystery how and why Indian cultural influence could result in a comparatively short time in the growth of highly developed and individualistic civilisations. Obviously, the cultural level of indigenous societies must have been high enough to accept this impulse from outside and to adapt it to their own genius; but what exactly was the cultural level of these societies?

Thus, we had not the slightest intention to indulge in “colonialist” archaeology: all we wanted to do was to find out, after Ranke, *wie es wirklich gewesen* and to be amazed. If anything, there was on the contrary already a hint of exhortation to Western archaeologists to “rethink” Southeast Asian archaeology by seeing indigenous prehistoric cultures in a more favourable light than was hitherto the custom.

Although originally a predominantly British venture, support for the expedition came increasingly from Australian sources, so much so that in the last two or three years one could legitimately speak of a “Thai-Australian” expedition. It was thus the first Australian venture into the field of Southeast Asian archaeology.

In order to achieve the aims of the expedition in the most efficient way it was thought best to concentrate geographically on the central and northern part of the country, so as to be complementary to the work undertaken in western Thailand by the Danes (we were thinking mainly of the Neolithic Ban Kao sites) and in northeastern Thailand by the Americans who had just discovered — but not yet excavated — the promising Bronze Age Non Nok Tha site. The first three months of the first season of the Thai-British Archaeological Expedition (henceforth TBAE), in late 1965, were thus spent in conducting reconnaissance in the vicinity of Chiang Saen, Uttaradit, Lopburi and U-Thong, which resulted in the singling-out of three sites to be “trial”-excavated. These were, from North to South:

- 1) A cave called Tham Nguang Chang (“Elephant’s Trunk Cave”), 98 km from Chiang Mai along the road to Fang;
- 2) A series of shallow mounds of limy soil named Khok Charoen (“Hill of Prosperity”), situated 13.5 km north of Chai Badan in the northeastern part of Lopburi Province, near the road to Phetchabun;
- 3) An open field called Tha Muang within the precincts of the ancient city of U-Thong, Suphanburi Province.

#### Tham Nguang Chang

Our original intention was to concentrate on open sites, but as the survey around Chiang Saen did not yield any clear indication of any such, the Elephant’s Trunk Cave

was chosen as a representative excavation in the northern area. On account of its modest size, this cave site could be excavated in full during the first exploratory season and was rapidly and adequately published, albeit not in the form of a monograph (Watson 1968: 304-305; Watson and Loofs 1967: 256-262). The cave contained three early Metal Age burials and a socketed bronze axe not associated with a burial in the upper filling, and some Hoabinhian-type stone tools in the lower levels. Its significance lies in the fact that two iron axes associated with one of the burials, as well as some pottery, were then unique in Thailand.

#### Tha Muang

This site, 1.5 km distant from the present town of U-Thong and about 200 m west of the road to Nakhon Pathom within the walls of the ancient city, was discovered because of numerous and intriguing surface finds. These included notably potsherds reminiscent of “Funanese” pottery from Oc-Eo, fragments of other objects common at Oc-Eo such as clay *tampons*, stone casting moulds for ear ornaments, saddle querns and associated rollers, and iron slag, as well as things not known from Funanese sites such as pieces of burnt clay and small polished stone adzes. The latter existed as surface finds.

As the ancient city of U-Thong is believed to have been the capital, at least for some time, of the Buddhist kingdom of Dvāravatī (6th-11th centuries AD), and as these surface finds seemed to indicate a long pre-Dvāravatī occupation of the site, perhaps going back to Neolithic times, we decided to excavate in depth. After the 1966 excavations, which produced rich stratified material from Dvāravatī times, we thus intended to go further down into pre-Dvāravatī layers. This, however, could only be done during the fourth (1969) season when the original, filled-in cuttings were further excavated and new cuttings were opened to supplement the grid laid out in 1966. This resulted in much new information on both periods but also posed some questions, the answers to which were sought in the opening of small test-cuttings on shallow mounds adjacent to the original site where similar surface finds had been made and which revealed an occupation contemporary with the main site at practically all levels. One of these questions, whether the many glass beads found throughout the site, or at least some of them, could have been locally manufactured, could be answered in the affirmative as droplets of molten glass, as well as the base of a pot covered with a thick, greenish glaze, were discovered in undisturbed deposits in one of these test-cuttings which could be dated to the mid-fourth

century AD. This is thus proof of the earliest glass and glaze manufacture in Thailand and one of the earliest in the whole of Southeast Asia, pointing to the possible independent invention of this technological process there. But, in spite of speedy publication of this highly important matter in a professional journal read by all archaeologists specialising in this part of the world (Loofs 1970: 183) and in a paper presented (albeit *in absentia*) at the 1973 London Colloquy on Early South East Asia (Loofs 1979b: 347), I have yet to come across a reference to this discovery in text books.

With regard to less sensational and yet significant results of the Tha Muang excavations, such as the discovery of what appears to be an important iron production centre or more general considerations concerning the cultural situation of the Lower Menam Basin in pre-Dvāravatī times (i.e. as part of a Mon or proto-Mon cultural area stretching from Beikthano in Lower Burma in the west to Oc-Eo in present southernmost Vietnam in the east), publications appeared very soon after, or even still during, these excavations (Loofs 1970: 180-183, 1971a and b, 1979a-c; Watson and Loofs 1967: 245-248).

The bulk of the finds of Tha Muang site consisted of pottery (unrestorable but with many rim pieces) of the typically carinated "Dvāravatī" kind. The main task related to these excavations would thus be to elaborate a typology of the ceramic history of the area from pre-Dvāravatī times to possibly the abandonment of the city of U-Thong in 1350. This has not yet been done, but an attempt was made immediately after the excavations (presented at the 28th International Congress of Orientalists, Canberra, 1971) to link the earlier phases of this pottery with that of Ban Kao to the west and Khok Charoen to the north (Loofs-Wissowa 1980b).

It seems that, in spite of timely scholarly publications, the site of Tha Muang like that of Tham Nguang Chang has virtually been ignored by Southeast Asian archaeologists.

#### Khok Charoen

However, the most important site of the TBAE and the only one to be excavated in four seasons, turned out to be the Neolithic burial ground of Khok Charoen, situated in a region of low limestone hills on the eastern side of the Chao Phraya drainage basin. The outliers of the north-south mountain chain separate the latter from the Khorat Plateau, i.e. the drainage basin of the Mekong. This geographical situation is significant insofar as it raises the question of whether this less-than 1000 m high Phetchabun Mountain Range could have acted for a long time as a barrier to the expansion of bronze from sites such as

Non Nok Tha or Ban Chiang, a mere 200-250 km distant as the crow flies.

The site was discovered through surface finds of small stone adzes and cord-marked potsherds on a low promontory bounded by a steep slope and doubled for most of its extent by a stream. These ground features reminded William Watson of Neolithic habitation sites in southern China (Watson 1968: 303; Watson and Loofs 1967: 249), especially two other areas of slightly swelling ground lay at a short distance to the southwest of the promontory, also covered with cord-marked potsherds. We were thus rejoicing in the prospect of finding a large Neolithic settlement of a kind not so far discovered anywhere in Southeast Asia. The exact location of the first trial excavation on the promontory itself was, however, determined by the find of human bones there, made by local farmers when digging charcoal kilns, which suggested the presence of burials in addition to habitation.

Three cuttings of 4x4 m were disposed to straddle the site and soon five burials were discovered at very shallow depths (about 50-80 cm below present surface), accompanied by pottery placed near the heads or feet of the skeletons. Disk-beads and shells were also found but no metal of any kind. However, because of root growth, erosion and other natural agents, these burials were so disturbed and fragmentary that no detailed anatomical or archaeological analysis was possible, except that the bodies were placed in a supine position in shallow graves dug into the limy soil, with different orientations (one head to N, one head to SW and three heads to NE) and that one body at least seems to have been intentionally covered with large potsherds whereas another may have been weighed down with stones. The pottery consisted of globular cord-marked pots, footed (= pedestal) bowls and several vessels of different shapes, decorated with sophisticated incised designs. The association of the latter with the burials is not altogether secure, although they seem to come from the same "layer" in this much-disturbed soil.

These somewhat fragmentary and inconclusive results of the 1966 trial excavation of Khok Charoen were immediately published (Watson and Loofs 1967), including a fairly detailed description of the pottery with two photographs of footed bowls *in situ* which showed similarity with some of the pottery of Ban Kao (Sørensen and Hatting 1967: pl. 97). The photograph of a large cord-marked pedestal bowl from this excavation was published soon afterwards (Watson 1968: pl. XLVI,b); this was found to present a remarkable similarity not only to some of the Ban Kao pots (Sørensen and Hatting 1967: pls 90-91), but also, at least in its general form, to a bowl with a

high ringfoot from the lowest levels at Non Nok Tha (Solheim 1980: 48,c).

The entire second season (1967) of the TBAE was devoted to following up these interesting finds at Khok Charoen. In the hope of discovering a habitation site in the vicinity of what had turned out to be a cemetery we shifted excavation to one of the above-mentioned other mounds, 200-250 m distant from the promontory, only to discover at least 42 similar burials with rich grave goods of pottery and personal adornments of stone and shell. Again no metal object was found whatsoever. These burials were also in an extended supine position in two main orientations (head to S or head to E), but with no clear division as far as the type of grave goods and the layer from which the graves appeared to have been dug are concerned. Subsequent datings also showed that on statistical grounds the two orientations could not be chronologically differentiated. This dilemma was not helped by the extremely poor state of preservation of the skeletons and the equally poor soil conditions, which allowed only the most rudimentary distinction of "layers" and left us with only the pottery itself to sort out chronological sequences. We surmised that the site must have gone through at least two cycles of erosion and re-accumulation of soil and that the latest erosion removed the habitation surfaces to which both the burials and the present surface pottery relate.

Following on from this we distinguished three groups of pottery finds, separated by indeterminate periods of time:

- a) single pots buried upright, without signs of burials or other indication of their purpose;
- b) the burials and their pottery, placed in pits dug from a surface which was subsequently removed by erosion;
- c) the potsherds found on the present surface.

The results of this second excavation season at Khok Charoen were also immediately published in a preliminary way (Loofs and Watson 1970; Watson 1968: 303-304), including the drawings of a cord-marked globular vessel and of a decorated footed bowl, the two main pottery forms found at the site (Watson 1968: 303), as well as a descriptive typology of this pottery dividing the first form into seven and the second into eight main types, some of which can be divided further into sub-types (Loofs and Watson 1970: 71-75). Photographs of a restored cord-marked globular vessel and footed bowl and of pottery *in situ* were also published then (Loofs and Watson 1970: between pages 78-79).

By agreement with the Thai Fine Arts Department, the material yielded by this excavation was shipped to London for study at the Institute of Archaeology and the

Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, of which Prof. Watson was then the Director.

Because of the unexpectedly rich results of this second season at Khok Charoen, which revealed this site to be the largest known Neolithic burial ground in Southeast Asia, and also again in the hope of finding the settlement providing all these burials, the third season (1968), too, was devoted to further investigation of this site. As Watson could not get away from London then, I was in charge of this excavation. This time an area was selected for excavation in a triangular position between the two previous sites, i.e. on the third of the shallow mounds on which the same surface finds had been made, and yet another 13 burials of a similar kind were brought to light. However, several hitherto-unknown types of pottery were found among the pots placed next to the bodies as grave goods. One of these, a large, narrow-mouthed jar with incised decoration and four small solid conical legs, does not seem to have a counterpart anywhere in eastern Asia; a drawing of this type was published very soon after the excavations (Loofs 1974b: 81) (this paper Figure 3).

Also, for the first time, signs of an occupation posterior to the burials were finally found in the form of post-holes. A new type of pottery in the upper level was a thick-walled large jar-like vessel of an orange ware with crude cross cord-markings on the outside, which I first interpreted as a storage vessel (Loofs-Wissowa 1980: 8). A considerable number of small and even fairly large (up to 20 cm) sherds of this coarse pottery were found and excavated at the site, not in association with burials, but never enough to reconstruct an entire vessel. However, recent analysis has shown that it was more of a bowl than a jar, but of truly impressive dimensions: over 60 cm in diameter at the rim and about 30 cm deep! Moreover, as the 212 (!) *different* rim pieces indicate, there must have been a surprisingly great number of individual vessels of this kind in use during a relatively short time of residential occupation and in a restricted area, even if some of these different rim pieces come from the same bowl. I have not yet come across reports of similar enormous vessels in a pre-metal context anywhere else in Thailand or indeed the rest of Southeast Asia.

It was after the completion of this third excavation season at Khok Charoen in 1968 that I could use a period of study leave, with the help of a Nuffield Fellowship, to work on the finds of the first and second seasons in London. This work consisted, as a first step, of the restoration, classification and drawing of the large amount of burial pottery, the study of other finds connected with the burials and the establishment of a burial catalogue. Our

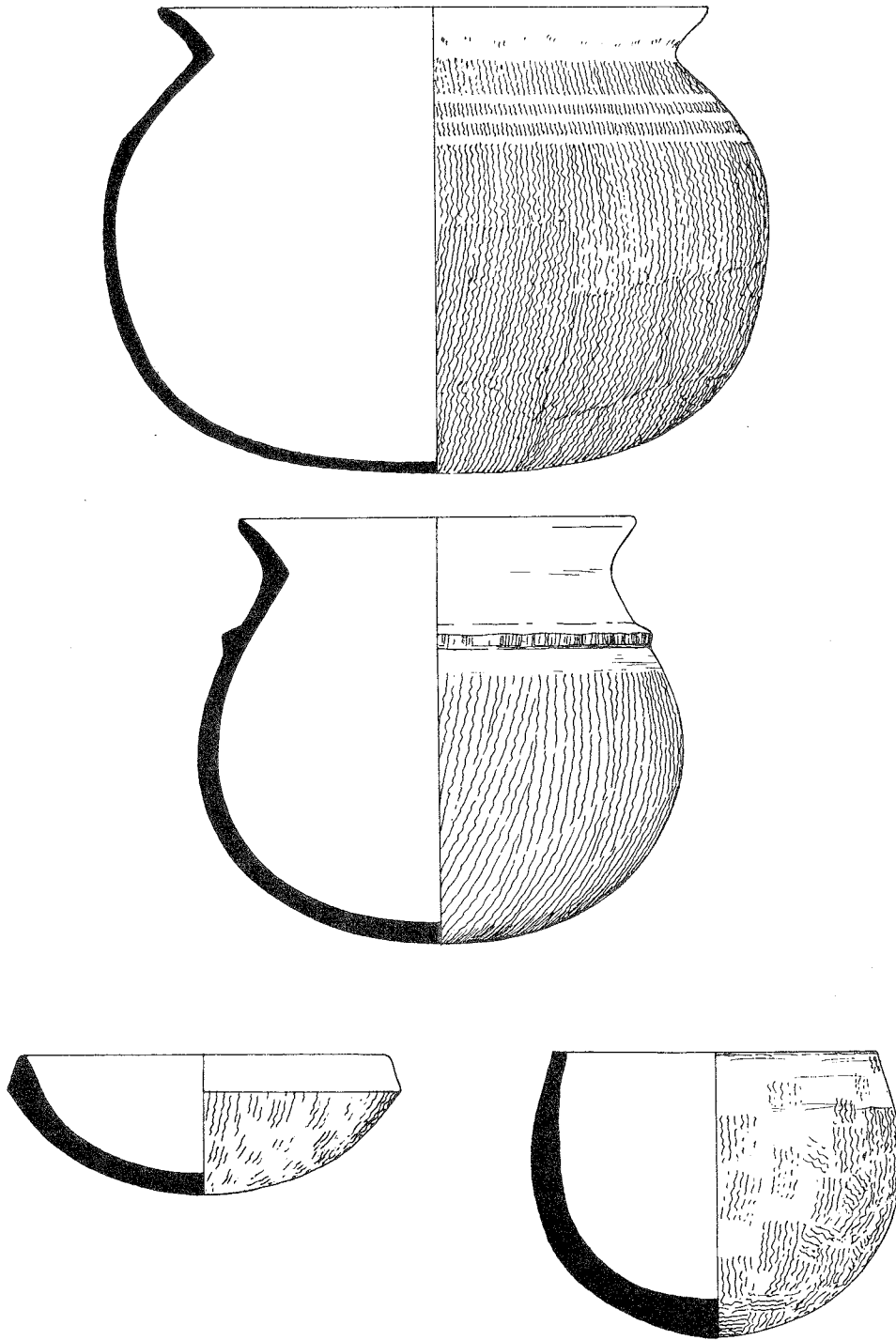


Figure 1: Unfooted earthenware vessels from Khok Charoen third season (50% linear natural size)

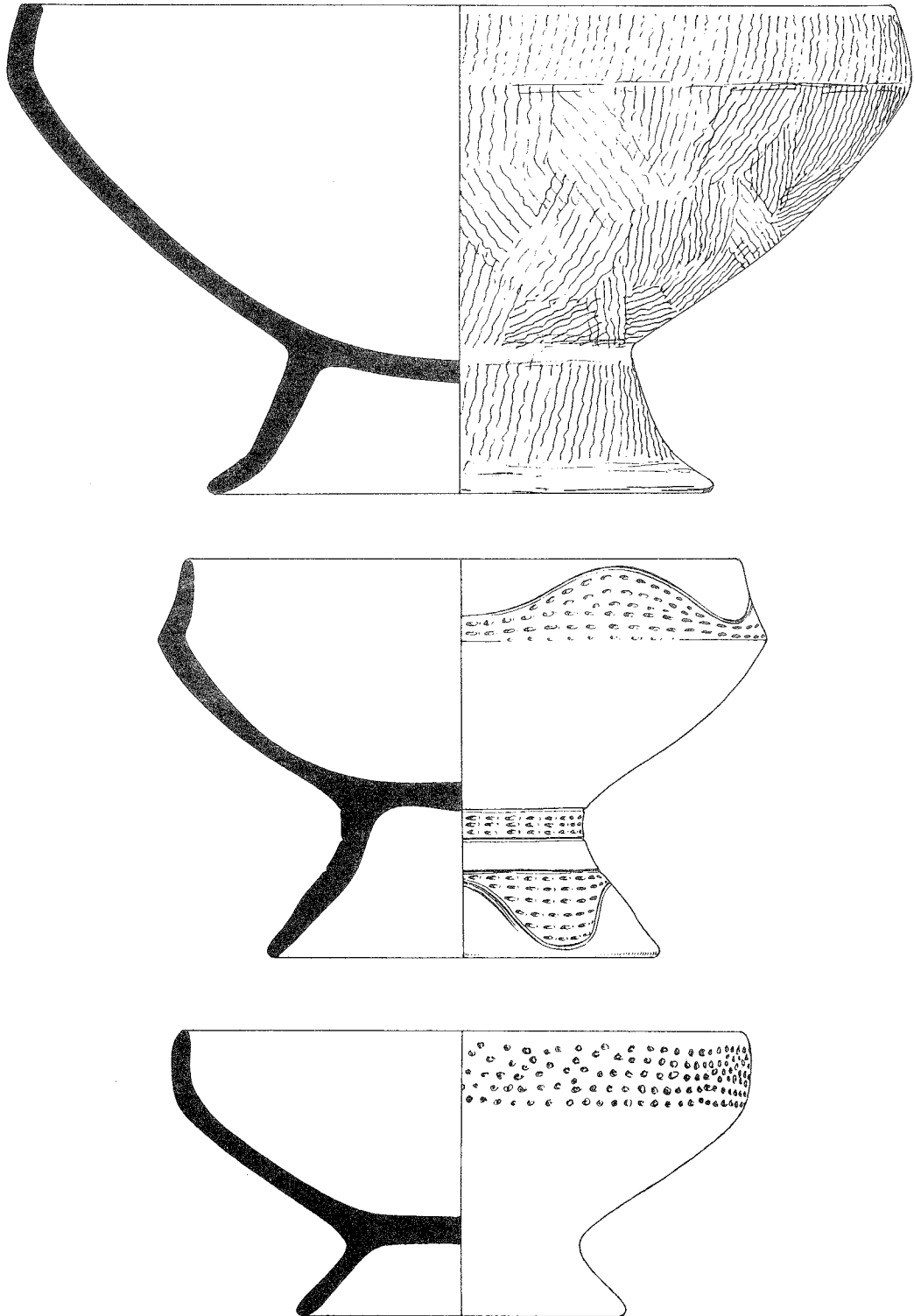


Figure 2: Footed earthenware vessels from Khok Charoen third season (50% linear natural size)



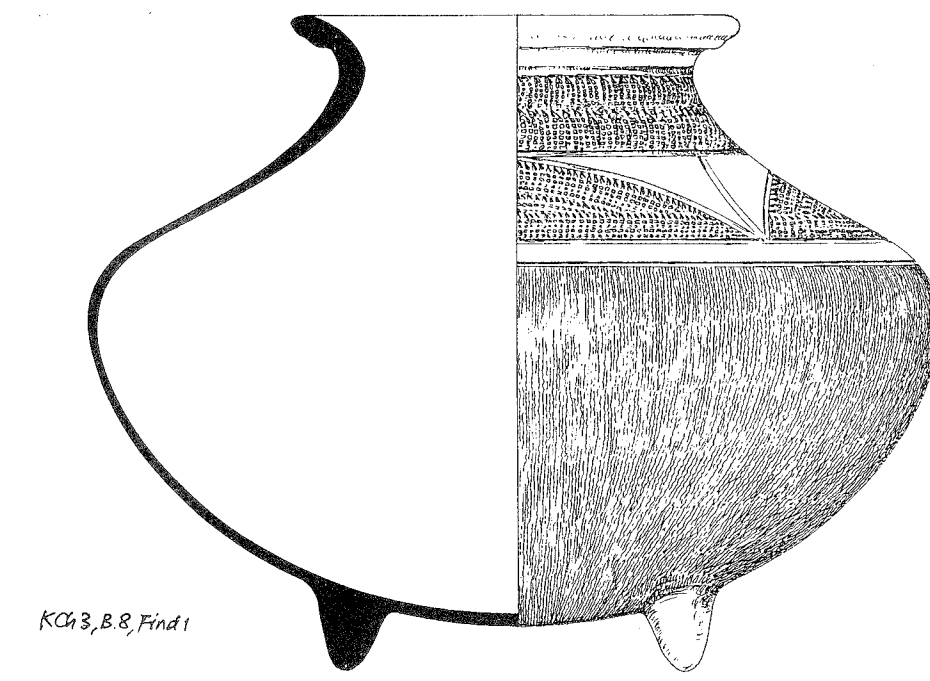


Figure 3: Four-legged incised and cord-marked jar from Khok Charoen (32% linear natural size)

intention was that this work, supplemented by the study of the finds of the third season at Khok Charoen which I was to undertake upon my return to Australia, where they would have been shipped in the meantime, should form the basis for the first volume of publications of the TBAE in analogy to the beautifully produced reports of the Thai-Danish Prehistoric Expedition.

After evaluating the by-now very rich and varied excavated material, especially pottery, from these three seasons at Khok Charoen, we came to the conclusion that yet another season would be needed to answer various questions related to this pottery, although we had by now abandoned all hope of finding a pure habitation site. As the first trial excavation in 1966 had yielded very sophisticated pottery of types not found again in the second and third seasons, it was decided to follow up the excavation on the original promontory. This, however, was possible only during the fifth and last season of the TBAE in 1970 and was done by excavating six more 4x4 m cuttings inside the grid laid out in 1966. I was again in charge of the excavation. As expected, several further burials came to light in this very much disturbed soil: eleven fairly secure as burials, although none of them with a complete skeleton, and six only indicated by pottery finds at the rim of the cutting with the burial itself being either in a baulk or outside the excavation. There is also the possibility that

we have here again only single pots being interred for an unknown purpose. As there was no time to follow this matter up in the field and as the murky stratigraphy did not allow any clear conclusion one way or the other, the question must remain open. Anyhow, these pots, which include again some hitherto unknown types, must have been roughly contemporary with the burials whether or not they were directly associated with them. I published two of them, unusually carinated cord-marked bowls with wide mouth, as soon as possible (Loofs-Wissowa 1980: 17), because I saw in them a link between certain Ban Kao pottery types and the very steeply carinated bowls from Oc-Eo and Tha Muang, i.e. Funan or Early Dvā-ravatī.

#### POST-EXCAVATION ACTIVITIES

With the 1970 season the TBAE had come to the end of its fieldwork (Loofs 1970) and now entered the more difficult and time-consuming stage of the study of the finds with a view towards their publication, which was the more cumbersome as they were split up in two locations in different parts of the world. In the case of the Khok Charoen excavations, the finds of the first two seasons, supervised by Watson, had gone to London, whereas those of the third and fourth seasons, supervised by me, had been deposited in Canberra. Although we

both got to work with considerable enthusiasm, good will and very best intentions, we had to realise that communication and comparing of notes by correspondence, telephone or by mutual visits, was not as easy as we had, perhaps naively, hoped or expected. It must also be kept in mind that in the 1970s there were no faxes, telegrams were still called cables and even to obtain a telephone line to London was not always easy.

Moreover, we were both caught up in increased duties at our respective universities and in new urgent research projects, not uncommon for academics actively engaged in undergraduate teaching on return from fieldwork (Watson was then Professor of Chinese Art and Archaeology and I Reader in Southeast Asian Civilisations). In my own case there was the additional drawback that I, as the only archaeologist in what was essentially a History Department which had no support services for archaeological work, could obtain these services only from the Prehistory Departments at my University. This caused delays and even the loss of certain material. The 1970s, moreover, was the time when the rapid growth of Asian Studies of the 1960s was clearly over and we started to feel the pinch of dwindling resources, while at the same time being asked to diversify our course offerings. Plans for extensions of the Asian Studies building to include archaeological workrooms and a small museum came to naught.

With the help of an Australian Research Grant I was nevertheless able to employ some students to assist me in washing the approximately two tons (!) of potsherds from Khok Charoen III and IV in a makeshift workroom after which, towards the end of the decade, I could begin with the restoring of the burial pottery — about 130 vessels — all on my own (except for able assistance from my wife). I also continued to publish on Khok Charoen, either on particular aspects of it — e.g. the large number of tektites found there (Loofs 1979c) — or by discussing the site in other publications dealing with Southeast Asia archaeology. Last but not least I included Khok Charoen prominently in my teaching. Thus, it could be argued that I discharged more or less adequately my duty as an archaeologist to make the results of his excavations public and to integrate them into the body of knowledge about the wider archaeological context, even though the bulk of the finds under my care has not yet been properly published.

On his side, William Watson worked equally patiently on publishing the Khok Charoen excavations, notably by including a discussion of the site in the London Colloquy on Early South East Asia in 1973, organised by Ralph Smith and himself. His paper (Watson 1979) describes in

some detail the soils of the site, its pottery and the relationship of the latter with other pottery complexes such as Ban Kao and Non Nok Tha. The question of whether this site without metals should be called “Metal Age”, on account of the similarity of its pottery with that of Non Nok Tha, was answered firmly in the negative: “It is clear that the Kok Charoen community lived the neolithic life” (Watson 1979: 57).

Watson also pointed out (1979: 61-62) that if the third millennium BC dates for certain pottery types from Non Nok Tha, which have their counterparts in late second or early first millennium BC Khok Charoen, were to be accepted, one would have to explain not only the permanence of pottery types over more than a thousand years, but also the fact that in a thousand years bronze did not spread from Non Nok Tha to a site a mere couple of hundred km away, albeit on the other side of a low mountain chain. Defenders of the Non Nok Tha dates, on the other hand, simply argued that the dates from Khok Charoen seemed “rather too recent” or “much too late” (Bayard 1979: 27).

In 1979, Watson was able to secure the research assistance of Wendy Ho which developed into Ho writing her PhD, University of London, on the pottery of Khok Charoen (Ho 1984). The immense value of this thesis must be seen in the fact that, although it only deals with the finds of Khok Charoen I and II, leaving out the relatively less important ones from III and IV, it places the site in the wider context of Central Thailand and even in the more immediate one of Lopburi Province itself. As part of the fieldwork for her thesis, Ho conducted two test excavations fairly close to Khok Charoen, at Ban Dong Din Daeng and Ban Sub Takien, which yielded useful material for comparison. On the strength of the data thus obtained Khok Charoen was seen as a backward but largely self-sufficient community dated to approximately 1400-700 BC. Ho's thesis thus reinforced Watson's doubts concerning the proposed dates for bronze at Non Nok Tha. With the completion of Ho's thesis, work on the Khok Charoen material in London had come to an end and the finds were eventually returned to Thailand.

#### WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Experiencing great difficulties in finishing work on the Khok Charoen material on my own, I suggested as early as 1980 that Wendy Ho come to assist me for some time but was given to understand that this could only be done after the completion of her PhD in London, rather than as part of it as I had hoped. Eventually, I succeeded in obtaining a Visiting Fellowship for Dr Ho for 1986 or 1987 which she was, however, unable to accept for personal

reasons. Attempts to invite Prof. Watson failed for lack of funds. As is well known, Australia was then in the midst of a recession from which it has by no means recovered and my Faculty (Asian Studies) had to fight for its very existence. This also meant that long-term projects were sometimes neglected in favour of new ventures promising quick returns in terms of publications or public recognition. These remarks are not to be taken as an excuse but as explanation for the sad fact that work on my archaeological material had almost come to a stand-still while I was engaged in other academic pursuits which I considered, rightly or wrongly, to be of greater urgency or importance.

This unsatisfactory situation continued into my retirement and life as a Visiting Fellow (without allowance) with the additional handicap of certain health problems. However, I have now been working steadily on my material for some time, in conditions which are far from ideal, and I am determined to publish the Khok Charoen III and IV finds as soon as the circumstances allow and to return them to their rightful owner with my sincere apologies for having kept them for so long.

Having thus unburdened myself, and trying to learn from my mistakes better late than never, the best advice I can give to young archaeologists contemplating the exciting but demanding activity of getting down to earth and into it, is never bite off more than you can chew and, once you have bitten, chew well and publish quickly!

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