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ROCK ART IN THAILAND: A LEGACY

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some significant points on rock art of the prehistoric period in Thailand beginning with how local folk tales influence local people's perception of rock art which differs from that proposed by scholars, followed by archaeological visits to rock art sites, artworks on the rock walls of the prehistoric artists, the past information from rock art and the present condition of rock art sites and the challenges of preservation. Though non-scientific learning of local people on rock art prior to academic inventory rock art sites of archaeologists, the results of the archaeological research brought a new perspective to the local people and have made them aware of their value and stimulating them into protecting sites in their community.

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INTRODUCTION

From the prehistoric period to the historic period members of various ethnic groups in Thailand created material cultures of various forms; some of these have survived until the present while others are only known through archaeological evidence.

Rock art is one form of material culture which has been a product of the people in various times, such as prehistoric cavemen, ancient agriculturists and fishermen, Buddhists and Hindus and even a member of the Royal family.

Archaeological evidence tells us that groups of cavemen who both created and possessed rock art appeared in this country very late, and

they were groups of hunter-gatherers who inhabited a mountainous area rather permanently and fishermen who regularly stayed in caves/shelters on islets near the shore during the fishing season. The cavemen's way of life which had gone on for thousands of years continued even in the sedentary community. However, evidence from excavated sites in the Northeast (Ban Chiang in Udon Thani Province, Non Nok Tha in Khon Khaen Province) reveals a new way of life different from that of the hunter-gatherer: about 5,000 BP, heralded the advent of cultivating and herding community in Thailand [Charoenwongsa, 1987; Bayard, 1971]. The people of the community mainly planted rice using water buffaloes for the ploughing. They raised cattle, pigs, and poultry while dogs were domesticated. During the three-thousand year period of this way of life new techniques which facilitated farming and domestication of animals were developed by the ancient farmers and herdsman. Fortunately some of them engaged in rock art, in which they depicted scenes of their great innovation, i.e. rice cultivation and animal domestication.

Their level of technical development also played a role in determining how the artwork was done. The replacement of stone by metal in some agricultural communities led to the production of sophisticated metal tools, some of which were used to carve rock. The so-called *petroglyphs* of the prehistoric period have been identified as being linked with the technological advancement of the agricultural community since the tools to make them seem to belong to the metal age.

The knowledge of how to use sophisticated metal tools and how to create petroglyphs was passed down over thousands of years and adopted by the people of the historic period. Artisans of that time were skilled in carving stone both for rock art and for building.

The existence of moated sites and evidence of early artifacts from overseas such as etched beads and carnelian pendants of the fourth

century BCE (Glover 1996: 70-73, 80) and seal bearing a Brahmi script of the first century CE (Srisuchat 1996: 269; 2011: 254-255) indicate historic period in Thailand began several centuries before the emergence of the rock art of the period. The earliest rock art site of the historic period only dates from the seventh century CE (Srisuchat 1992: 13).

Rock art of the historic period still chiefly maintained the role of the ritualistic art as it had in previous times; however, its themes were different from those of the prehistoric period, for instance, the scenes of the people's way of life as well as their rituals were rarely portrayed on rock in the historic period. Thus, the themes present in the rock art provide information indicating the distinctive aspects of rock art during the two periods. In cases where rock art sites contain superimposed works of different styles and/or aesthetic works unrelated to religious concepts, the work may be distinguished through the comparative study of the techniques used in the creation of the rock art of the two categories.

In this paper, the rock art of the prehistoric period will be discussed. The rock art of the time was created to record noteworthy events in the artists' lives, some of which reflected their communal perceptions.

Rock art in Local Folk Tales

A rock art site in Thailand that is of particular importance to archaeology was found rather accidentally. It is not an exaggeration to say that the rock art sites were known to local people in this country long before their first reference by scholars. Some local folk tales on everybody's lips which were heard by some scholars led them to discover rock art sites. For instance: L.L Lunet de Lajonquiere, a French military surveyor, who was in Thailand during the period 1903-1909 to map the country, heard a part of the story of Sang Thong during his visit