

By William H. Honan

Several weeks ago, I was standing in one of the basement laboratories of the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia cradling in my hands a prehistoric pot. About the size of a large pineapple and decorated with a hypnotically swirling spiral design, it was called a Ban Chieng ceremonial burial urn—the name comes from one of the villages in northeastern Thailand where such pots have recently been unearthed in great number. As I looked closely at the design, I could see points where the prehistoric potter had paused and lifted his painting instrument—perhaps for another dip of paint, maybe to set down his brush and throw a log on his fire, or—who knows?—perhaps to fight a skirmish against some unexpected intruder.

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In a moment or two, I caught myself staring out the laboratory window. My imagination had winged off to the Bronze Age.

Such daydreaming is one of the occupational hazards—and one of the delights, too—of an interest in antiquities. The temptation is especially strong in the case of Ban Chieng pots because these humble-looking, oddly shaped, mysteriously decorated vessels, besides possessing a strange enchantment which has aroused the interest of museum curators and art collectors, may have a revolutionary importance in the field of archeology. There is now considerable although still highly controversial evidence to suggest that these objects were made as early as 4500 B.C., or in what archeologists and prehistorians somewhat grandly call the Fifth Millennium. Much older pottery has been found in caves in Japan, but Ban Chieng pots are far more important because they have been discovered in graves along with bronze implements. At present, there is no direct way of telling the age of a very old piece of bronze (unless it bears

a telltale inscription), but if the dates indicated by recent technical analysis are correct for Ban Chieng pottery, then, by inference, the bronze found in the same graves was made in 4500 B.C. too—and that's 1,500 years earlier than anybody ever suspected it could be made, and in a part of the world where no one expected to find metallurgy practiced at such an early time. The development of bronze making is especially important to prehistorians because the so-called Bronze Age was the stage at which mankind graduated from a hunting-and-gathering, Stone Age existence to a settled community life in which the relatively complex arts of what we call civilization could begin to be practiced.

The notion that the Bronze Age may have originated in Southeast Asia instead of the Near East, as has been long supposed, is particularly tantalizing because it could explain one of the great mysteries of archeology. No one has yet discovered the source of the tin (bronze is composed of copper and tin) which supplied the Bronze Age of the Near East. Northern Thailand, however, happens

to be one of the rare places in the world with an abundant supply of tin as well as an adequate supply of copper—and the ores found there are rich enough for reduction by primitive smelting methods. Accordingly, some archeologists are now beginning to speculate that as early as 3000 B.C. the people living in what is now northern Thailand were exporting to the Near East and perhaps other parts of the world not merely the tin to supply early bronze industries, but also basic metallurgical technology and possibly even other arts and resources necessary for the beginning of civilized living. In short, the "cradle of civilization," so this revolutionary theory goes, was not the fertile crescent along the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers as every schoolchild since the nineteen-thirties has been taught to believe, but northern Thailand.

That is heady stuff indeed—and enough to provoke an archeologist who earned his Ph.D. shoveling dirt through a strainer in Mesopotamia to rumble in protest like an ancient thunder god. And, to be sure, the Southeast Asian theory is a long way from being proved conclusively. Still, the case is intriguing, if frustrating, and one which is also of interest because it illuminates the often illicit and underhanded antiquities trade.

For years, Ban Chieng pots have been quite literally kicking around in northeastern Thailand where rice farmers have been indifferently picking them out of the soil, sometimes crushing them for cement mix and occasionally even using them to decorate their homes. In the summer of 1966, Stephen Young, the son of a former U.S. Ambassador to Thailand, happened to be in Ban Chieng on a Harvard grant to study the political culture of northeastern Thai villages. Walking along a pathway that had been deeply eroded by recent monsoons, Young tripped on a root, fell forward, caught himself with both hands and, as he lay on the ground, noticed under his fingers a number of clay rings in the soil. These rings were the tops of pots which had been buried vertically. Young presented the objects to the National Museum in Bangkok, urging further excavation. The museum did nothing, but Young also mentioned his discovery to a certain Princess Pantip Chumbhot, by all accounts a delightful member of the Thai royal family who amuses her Western visitors with her aristocratic way of looking down her nose at King Phumiphon as an upstart country cousin. She also has a passionate interest in art and archeology, and thus it was not long before she organized a private expedition to Ban Chieng. Princess Chumbhot collected potsherds there and at various other Thailand sites and dispatched them to the University of Pennsylvania Museum, which, she had learned through an American friend, was developing a promising technique for dating ancient pottery.

In Philadelphia, there was already a long line of samples awaiting the so-called thermoluminescent dosimetry (TLD) analysis, and so it was several months before Mark Han, a young Chinese-born research specialist, got around to the Thai potsherds. When he did, he was astounded. The fragment Princess Chumbhot had collected at Ban Chieng was dated 4630 B.C. (plus or minus 520 years). "We were amazed and we repeated the experiment," Han recalls with a grin.

Dr. Froelich Rainey, the tweedy, tanned and gravel-voiced director of the museum, was equally nonplused. "I couldn't believe it," Rainey says. "The amazing thing was that Princess Chumbhot

"The very earliest 'bronzes' of the Near East contain arsenic instead of tin, but since arsenic occurs naturally with copper in sulfide ores, archeologists believe that it was not until the introduction of tin (or unnaturally large amounts of arsenic or other impurities) that the conscious alloying characteristic of the Bronze Age may be said to have been practiced.



An American student in Thailand tripped on a root, fell forward and landed on new clues to where and how civilization began.

had told us that this potsherd had been found in association with bronze implements. There was tremendous excitement, suspense and, of course, a good deal of healthy skepticism here. After all, we only had someone's word for it. And there had been no systematic digging."

Even in a state of feverish excitement, the world of archeology moves with dinosaurlike ponderousness, and thus it was not until 1973 that Rainey had managed to accomplish even the very first systematic digging at Ban Chieng. Back at the time of Stephen Young's fortuitous fall, an archeological team led by Prof. Wilhelm G. Solheim of the University of Hawaii was also on the prowl in northeastern Thailand. Solheim, rather like Heinrich Schliemann, who discovered ancient Troy, was following a mystical hunch. Sure enough, one of Solheim's students—Chester Gorman, who now heads the joint University of Pennsylvania-Thai Government dig at Ban Chieng—discovered pot fragments at the vertical edge of a mound near the village of Non Nok Tha, which is only a few miles away. An excavation at the site was commenced, and another of Solheim's students, Donald Bayard, eventually reported in a New Zealand publication that the Non Nok Tha dig had exposed as many as 115 prehistoric burials. These graves contained some 500 pots, a number of bronze artifacts and—the delight of the archeologists—several small, socketed ax heads and two pairs of sandstone molds that fit perfectly over the ax heads. It seemed solid evidence indeed that these ancient people—whenever they might have lived—had manufactured rather than imported their bronze tools.

Dating this material, however, has proved difficult. To begin with, graves at Non Nok Tha had been dug down through older graves; during a period of many centuries the geological strata had become badly scrambled. In addition, there were technical problems. At one point, two charcoal samples sent to Florida State University for radiocarbon (C-14) analysis produced dates, thanks to an

inexplicable foul-up, "some years in the future." Other excavated samples analyzed elsewhere indicated a confusing array of dates. Nevertheless, Bayard wrote in 1971 that he was convinced that highly developed bronze technology existed in northeastern Thailand "well before 2300 B.C.," although he said he recognized that others "may arrive at alternate conclusions." Later that year, Professor Solheim published his findings in the *National Geographic*, a sin his conservative colleagues considered shameless huckstering. In addition, by overstating his provable case, Solheim exposed himself to attack from all those with a stake in the anteriority of the Bronze Age of the Near East.

That same year the normally tranquil world of archeology was shaken by challenges from yet other quarters. T. A. Dayton, a researcher interested in the ancient Vinca culture of Yugoslavia, argued in *World Archeology* that some recent radiocarbon data demonstrated that the Bronze Age commenced in the Balkans long before its supposed ancestor in the Near East. And at the Eighth Congress of Pre- and Protohistory in Belgrade, Colin Renfrew, a widely published British archeologist, squared off with the Smithsonian's Theodore A. Wertime, who held the orthodox view that metallurgy came from the Near East; Renfrew maintained that European civilization took its original impetus from Near Eastern agriculture but then rapidly drew apart and ahead in developing metallurgy. Scholars tended to doubt the theories of Dayton and Renfrew, yet even Wertime soon acknowledged in *Science* that "early metallurgy has become a battleground."

Moreover, within the broader controversy, there now developed a rivalry among the Thailand investigators themselves, with Solheim's University of Hawaii team on one side and Rainey's University of Pennsylvania group on the other. Froelich Rainey, a respected leader in his profession who for many years has had the prestigious job of writing the annual entries on archeology for the *Yearbook of the Encyclopaedia Britannica*, sensed the need for some diplomatic pulling together if a substantial excavating project was to be undertaken. Accordingly, he traveled to Thailand and looked up Solheim's enterprising but level-headed student, Chester Gorman, who by then had drifted off to a paleolithic dig along the Burmese border. Much as if he were making peace by arranging a marriage between two medieval royal families, Rainey had Gorman appointed a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and put him in charge of the Ban Chieng excavation, which was jointly undertaken by Thai Department of Fine Arts and the University of Pennsylvania, operating under a grant from the National Science Foundation. That way, everybody, even the Thais, got a piece of the action. And, by January, 1973, Chester Gorman had uncovered a grave at Ban Chieng, in which he found an undisturbed skeleton with clay pots near the skull and a bronze ax head and other bronze tools beside one hand. Back in Philadelphia, under TLD analysis, the samples from these pots were dated by Mark Han at 3570 B.C. (plus or minus 480 years) and 3590 B.C. (plus or minus 275 years). That was significantly earlier than the Bronze Age of the Near East.

To Gorman and Rainey, the evidence was intriguing yet still not conclusive. Their caution was prompted by the fact that TLD dating is still in its infancy. The technique, first developed in the late fifties by George Kennedy, a U.C.L.A. geologist, is based on the fact that certain minerals contained in clay will, when exposed to high temperature, emit a faint light (called thermoluminescence) in addition to the normal "red-hot" glow. This faint light represents a discharge of the atomic energy accumulated through various natural processes since the material's original firing. Because such firing would have caused (Continued on Page 59)

# Hot pots

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a discharge of the material's previous energy accumulation, the "atomic clock" would have been set at zero. Accordingly, by measuring the amount of thermoluminescence in a pottery sample, a scientist can tell how much time has elapsed since it was manufactured.

It sounds relatively simple but in practice TLD is enormously complicated, and the effort to perfect the technique has been beset with difficulties. There is, for instance, the baffling case of the Acámbaro clay figures. A German hardware merchant by the name of Waldemar Julsrud, who settled in Acámbaro, a city in central Mexico, collected clay figures—32,000 of them—which the natives who sold them to him claimed they had dug up from secret prehistoric graves. But art historians now believe the smiling faces on the figures were laughing at Herr Julsrud, whose leg was being pulled and pocket fleeced. The clay figures are thought to be fakes, probably made within the last 100 years. When tested in 1970 at the University of Pennsylvania Museum, however, they yielded TLD dates from 200 B.C. to 2500 B.C. The mystery thickened a few months ago when the Acámbaro samples were tested again. Because these samples had been fired in the process of testing, the atomic clock in the material should have been turned back to zero, but instead the samples were found to have accumulated 10 per cent of their earlier age indications. At that rate, in just 50 years some of these samples seemed capable of indicating an age of up to 2500 B.C. Obviously, something had to be wrong. University of Pennsylvania scientists now

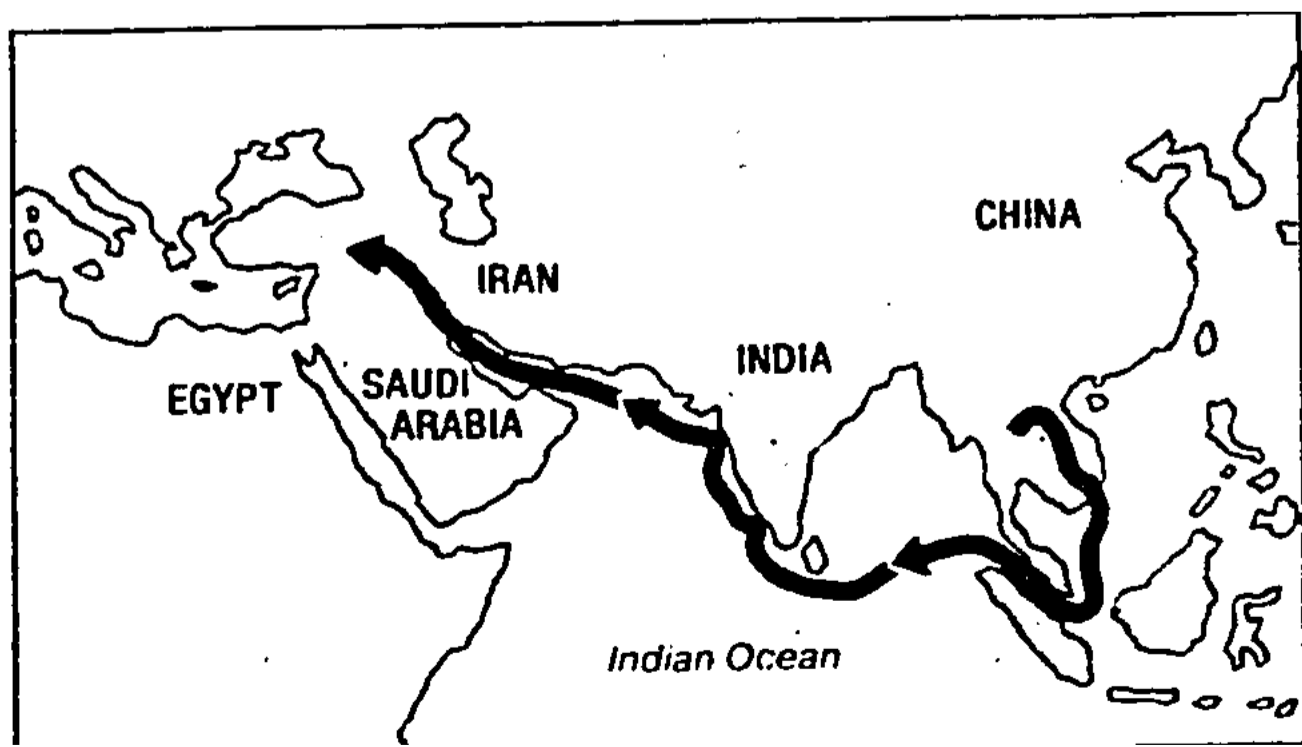
suspect that this particular type of clay may be highly susceptible to ultraviolet radiation and that this property causes it to emit a signal which is misleading. But no one knows for sure.

Does the clay at Ban Chieng also possess some unknown property which gives erroneously old dates? Or is it possible that such ancient pottery was fired at a relatively low temperature which somehow did not turn the atomic clock all the way back to zero, leaving in it a deceptive remnant of geologic time? There are no answers at present.

"We perform hundreds and hundreds of TLD tests which we know are accurate," Rainey says now, "and yet we can't explain these occasional mistakes. And that's why I don't want to draw any absolute conclusions about Ban Chieng until we can confirm our TLD dates with C-14 dates."

Last summer, he had gone to Ban Chieng and come back with a quantity of charcoal Gorman had found embedded with red-painted pottery, bronze tools and a prehistoric skeleton. At that time, Rainey stated in print that TLD dating had pegged Ban Chieng pottery as early as 4500 B.C., and then had declared exuberantly: "By the end of this year [1974], conclusive evidence should be in." But, instead, there had been frustration. Much of the charcoal Rainey brought back had turned out to be nothing but black dirt. Then the museum's C-14 counter had to be rebuilt in order to handle a series of very small samples. And then the earliest date produced was about 1900 B.C.

"It was a terrific disappointment," Rainey told me



Bronze Age itinerary? Some archeologists now speculate that civilization was exported from east to west—not vice versa.

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after he decided that although the charcoal dating was still in progress he would return to Ban Chieng once again. He did so early this year and this time got the Thai Government's permission to bring out about two pounds of human bones from a grave at Ban Chieng. The organic material inside the bones would then be subjected to C-14 tests. "This time," he said, "I think we'll have it."

Rainey returned to Philadelphia in March. The bones had gotten no farther than the University of Hawaii (they are still there being painstakingly measured by a physical anthropologist), and, even when they finally do reach Philadelphia, there will be many months if not years of testing ahead. Still, there was an unmistakable note of triumph in Rainey's voice when he told me: "I've got a C-14 date, anyhow!" Rainey explained that during his recent trip to Ban Chieng he received a joyous cable from Philadelphia reporting that one of the charcoal samples had produced a date of 3660 B.C. (plus or minus 330 years) and that another was dated 3380 B.C. (plus or minus 320).

"We're still puzzled that we can't get an exact correspondence between TLD and C-14 dating," he said. "We think the difficulty may be because we've been digging into some sort of mass grave in which things got jumbled. In any case, as of this time, after four separate, systematic excavations, I can say that C-14 dates show that the mound at Ban Chieng was occupied between at least 3500 B.C. and 200 B.C., and that very advanced bronze metallurgy was practiced there throughout that period. Now, that's much earlier than the Bronze Age of the Near East. The earliest bronze in

the Near East is around 3000 B.C. and samples that early are very rare. Here, we're finding very old bronze virtually everywhere we look. In addition, at Ban Chieng the bronze we find is technically advanced bronze—bronze with a high tin content that was cast in molds. When we find that we know there also has to be earlier and less sophisticated bronze—the stuff that is almost pure copper and was shaped by hammering. And that, when we find it, will tend to confirm the earlier TLD dates from the pottery.

"But this is going to take years," he continued. "You see, we've found that there are literally scores of prehistoric burial sites all around northeastern Thailand. The villagers are digging them up—it's impossible to police—but we've learned that all of these sites contain bronze and different sorts of pottery."

Later, after corresponding again with Gorman, who is still at Ban Chieng, Rainey went even further. He reminded me that Gorman had discovered seeds and rice husks at a paleolithic site called the Spirit Cave along the Thai-Burmese border, and that this organic material produced C-14 dates of around 10,000 B.C.—perhaps the earliest indication of agriculture. "When this discovery is put together with the earliest pottery which has been found in Japan, and with the Ban Chieng bronze," Rainey said, "you have evidence that all the basic arts of civilization—agriculture, pottery and bronze making—may have begun in this part of the world. In addition, there's another site in southern Thailand—Lopburi—where we are finding evidence suggesting that the very earliest iron was produced there. In other



Telltale bones and pots, newly discovered in Ban Chieng, Thailand. They may place the start of civilization at 4500 B.C.—1,500 years earlier than archeologists had generally supposed.

words, we've come across indications of phenomenal creativity in a wide range of the bases for civilization. The implications are extraordinary, to say the least."

To get another perspective, I reported Rainey's conclusions to the Smithsonian's Theodore Wertime, who has visited both the Vinca and Ban Chieng sites as well as having logged nearly 50,000 miles reconnoitering the Near East studying geological formations and panning rivers

in search of an ancient source of tin in that area (he has a hunch he may find it in eastern Iran on his next field trip).

The notion of Vinca anteriority, to Wertime, is wholly unfounded. As regards the

Thailand theory, he is more open-minded, although still fundamentally unconvinced. "It's possible," Wertime said, "that the close juxtaposition of high-grade copper and tin resources in Thailand led to an early and independent efflorescence of copper smelting and bronze making, but you can't establish that just by finding the metals. You have to discover the ways in which these metals were extracted from their ores in ancient times. That's been accomplished in the Near East. We've found the whole sequence—how, at first, naturally occurring copper was discovered in the earth and worked, then how this native copper began to be annealed, and finally how men organized the smelting of copper ore and chose among the various impurities they wished to retain or add, which is the process characteristic of the Bronze Age. Now, in Thailand, they haven't found these earlier sequences but only the very advanced bronze. And so the question arises of where those earlier sequences took place. I believe they took place in the Near East where we've found the evidence, and that

ancient prospectors, who ranged very widely looking for tin because it was so rare, got as far as Thailand and of course brought with them knowledge of an already highly developed metallurgy. On the other hand, it could be that we'll find evidence of the earlier sequences in Thailand, or that in Thailand men started with tin since it was abundant there and only later added copper. In other words, we may discover that whereas metallurgy started in the Near East with copper, gradually adding tin to make bronze, metallurgy started independently in Thailand with tin, gradually adding copper. That's possible, although I believe the weight of present evidence argues against it."

Giving Rainey a chance to reply, I reported Wertime's remarks to him. "In the first place," Rainey said, "it seems to me that we will unquestionably demonstrate that advanced bronze manufacture is considerably older in the Far East than in the Near East. In the second place, we already have discovered great deposits of ancient slag in northern Thailand which we are beginning to analyze in



Lot 440: One of the pots offered at Parke-Bernet's controversial Ban Chieng auction.

an attempt to work out the development of bronze manufacture. We can't date that slag at the present time, but we expect to be able to do so. Thus, the potential for working out the earlier stages of metallurgy is there. They've done all of that in the Near East because they've been working much longer over there. We're really only getting started in Thailand."

Every stride forward in the archeological investigation of Ban Chieng pots has been accompanied by an intensification of the zeal with which they have been traded on the antiquities market. And not surprisingly, as their significance becomes increasingly well understood, the price of the pots goes up. As that escalation occurs—the antiquities trade being what it is—underhandedness of many kinds becomes commonplace. The present character of this trade was well exemplified last January by a major sale of Ban Chieng pots at New York City's leading auction gallery, Sotheby Parke-Bernet.

It was uncanny to see as many as 43 pots so openly displayed and even pictured in a glossy catalogue. Two years before, in an effort to stop the plundering of an archeological treasure, the Government of Thailand outlawed the digging up, selling or export of antiques and even threatened to impose the death penalty against violators. Accordingly, these 43 pots had to have been slipped out just before the ban went into effect, or else smuggled more recently by persons willing to gamble with their lives.

Stranger still, once the auction at Parke-Bernet got under way, some fast-paced bidding appeared to propel the sale price of some pots up to \$1,900. The fact was, however, that very few sales were really being made. The manner in which the auctioneer called out the escalating series of prices made it impossible to tell whether the last price announced was in fact a successful bid from the floor or instead the declaration of the so-called reserve price of the consignor who was refusing to let his pots go for less than he thought them worth. The result was that a series of relatively modest bids, and failures to consummate sales, took on the appearance of land-office buying.

Strangest of all, some of the pots which actually did change hands that day were



Bronze Age technology: Early metallurgists alloy tin and copper to make bronze. Some archeologists now think Southeast Asians were the first to master the arts of community life.

later discovered to be fakes. The high-toned auction house never accepted the contention that some of the pots may have been 6,000 years younger than its catalogue had specified, but finally allowed that the decorations on some had been freshly painted, and that the repainting had been artfully disguised by means of mud which had been baked over the fresh paint in an effort to create a patina of seemingly great antiquity. On the strength of that, at least a couple of sales were rescinded.

Plundering, illegal trafficking, a sham (although legal) auction and forgery—it is a seamy business. And yet, none of these practices is unusual in the antiquities trade. Indeed, the manner in which Ban Chieng pots are being removed from prehistoric burial sites in a far-off corner of the world, sometimes falsified, and eventually placed on the mantelpieces of well-to-do Americans, and in the display cases of museums, is characteristic of a trade only rarely exposed to public view.

By about 1970, word was circulating among the more well-connected art and antiquities dealers in Bangkok that the red-painted pottery excavated in the northeast had been made as early as the

Fifth Millennium. As a result, these dealers began to amass collections. Villagers in the northern provinces soon learned that they could earn more money digging up old pots than they could farming rice or weaving cotton, and so a sizable amateur excavating industry developed. It paid off, too. A recent visitor to Thailand reports that a number of new houses have been built in Ban Chieng in the last two years on the proceeds of pottery digging.

The pots were not hard to find. The village of Ban Chieng consists of several thousand wooden cottages propped up on stilts on a mound of earth which is roughly a mile square and 10 to 15 feet high. To an archeologist, quite clearly, this elevation is an ancient burial mound. And sure enough, just beneath the surface, prehistoric graves are found in large number. Typically, the skeletons in them are remarkably complete. Ceremonial pots are found to either side of the skull and sometimes clustered in a "nest." Glass beads, bronze bracelets and bronze ax heads are discovered as well.

The pots come in a marvelous variety of shapes and sizes but the most interesting aspect is the red decoration. Some of the designs look like

greatly magnified fingerprints. Some are more complex, combining swirling designs with geometric shapes and patterns—all of which are believed to have had some magical significance. Other designs are thought to be zoomorphic—derived from the shapes of animals. Still others have a strong sexual suggestiveness. Indeed, these prehistoric potters were not the least bit shy about sexual expression. One female skeleton was found at Ban Chieng with a terra cotta phallus placed between the legs.

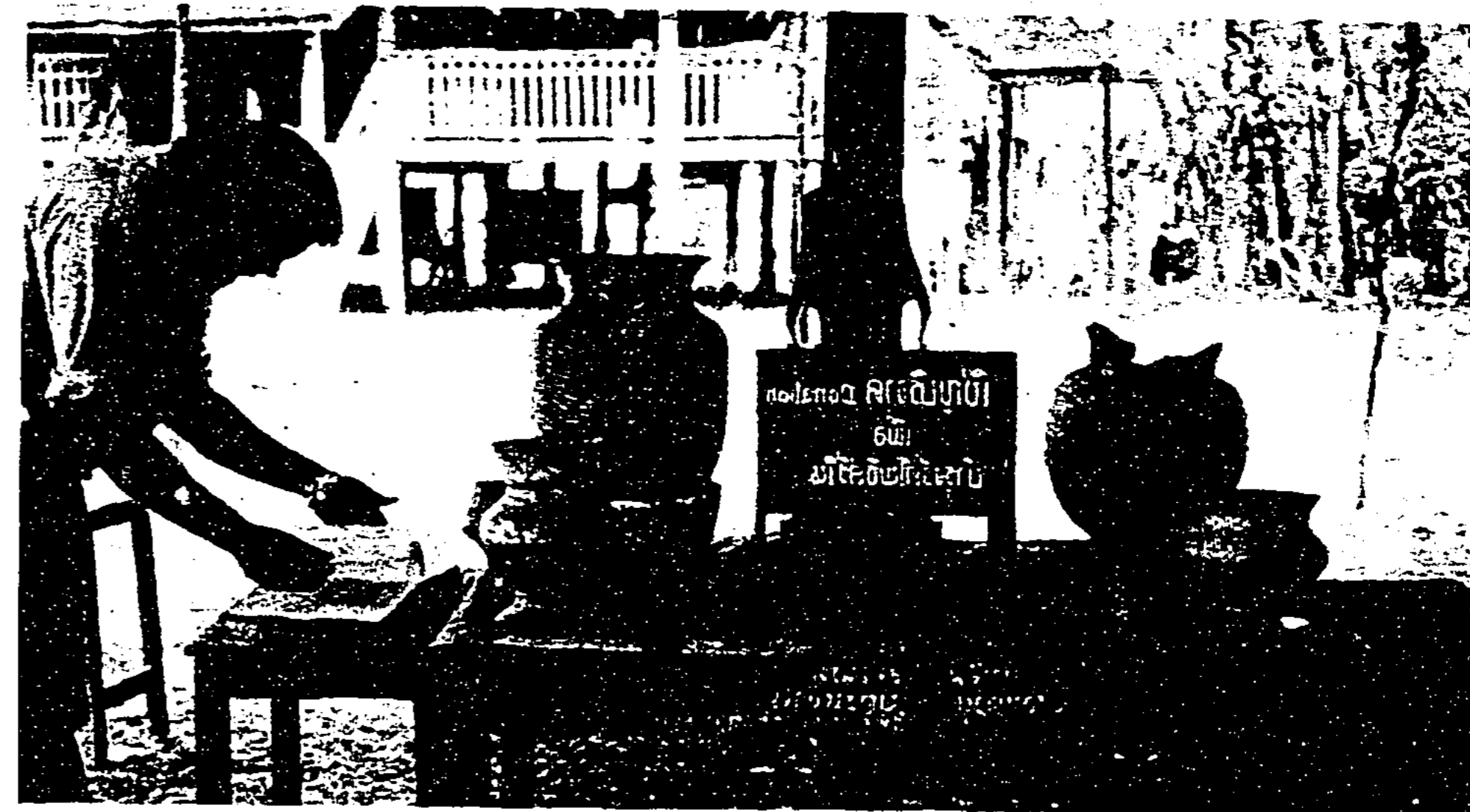
Despite the Thai Government's 1972 ban, the digging and trade have continued unabated, for several reasons. Many Thai villagers found they could dig profitably at night directly under their own homes. Today, a number of the stilt-supported cottages at Ban Chieng have curtains draped around the exterior for the obvious purpose of concealing excavations. Clandestine trade proved equally impossible to police. In addition, since there is a tradition of bribing local officials as a means of clearing the way for the smuggling of antiquities, it was most unlikely that the practice could be interrupted by a high-minded but unenforceable Government regulation. Finally, the United States, among other rich countries, has done practically nothing to prevent the bringing of illicit antiquities to its shores. A 1970 UNESCO treaty which would curb the importing of looted art has been signed by 22 nations, including the United States, but still awaits the necessary implementing legislation of the U.S. Congress. One reason for the delay, as reported in *The Times* last December by Grace Glueck, is the effectiveness of a recently formed organization called the American Association of Dealers in Ancient, Primitive and Oriental Art, which hired the prestigious Washington law firm Arnold & Porter to lobby against this legislation.

Here is a typical case illustrating the way in which a couple of Ban Chieng pots made their way into the hands of an American collector. Two or three years ago, Joel Ullman, a jovial, wise-cracking part owner of the Madison Avenue gallery Art Asia, Inc., who has been making collecting trips to Thailand for some 12 years, happened to be invited by a Thai dealer he knows who lives on the outskirts of Bangkok to inspect "some unusual objects." Ull-

man, who takes a wry delight in the "Terry and the Pirates" intrigues into which his work leads him, recalls that the Thai dealer, before displaying the objects, furtively closed his shutters and then produced a box of Ban Chieng pots that he had kept hidden under his bed. Ullman bought two for \$400.

Rather than entrust the pots to a professional smuggler, Ullman decided to risk bringing them out himself. Just before catching a plane to Hawaii, he went to a local tourist shop, purchased about \$20 worth of wooden salad bowls, paper umbrellas and cheap teakwood carvings, had them all rather sloppily packed, then tucked the pots underneath, finally outfitted himself with a loud floral sport shirt, slung a tourist-type camera around his neck, and in this garish attire proceeded to the airport. "They took one look at me at the bomb-inspection counter," he recalls with a chuckle, "and told me to get on the airplane. They weren't about to dig through all of that junk." In New York City, he stored the pots in the basement of his gallery.

Enter Mrs. Doris K. Rubin,



Archaeologist Chester Gorman with some of his team's pottery discoveries on display in Ban Chieng, one of the Thai villages that may have been the birthplace of civilization.

a genteel Park Avenue matron who fancies Oriental art. She had read about Ban Chieng pots in a technical journal and she had discussed them with Martin Lerner of the Metropolitan Museum of Art while she and her husband were traveling through India, Nepal and Sikkim on an art tour for which Lerner had served as a lecturer. Thus, it was with great delight that Mrs. Rubin learned Joel Ullman had a

couple of these oddities stashed away, and when he produced them she snapped them up for \$900. The pots are now on a shelf in Mrs. Rubin's study surrounded by Indian miniatures, a Khmer bronze and a Tibetan prayer rug.

In the short while since Mrs. Rubin's acquisition, the price of Ban Chieng pots has nearly doubled. The best examples are beginning to fetch

prices approaching those of the better-known Chinese neolithic pottery, and they may go higher still. In such a market, forgeries become common and difficult to detect. One American dealer now estimates that 90 per cent of the pots coming out of Thailand today are fakes.

Lerner of the Metropolitan explains one of the ways in which Ban Chieng pots are doctored. The farmers who

supply the Bangkok dealers, he says, "learned that they got paid better for the nicely decorated pots than for the plain ones, and so they became very adept at 'improving' faded coloring and actually painting on their own fanciful designs."

What lies ahead for the Ban Chieng pots? The archaeological investigation, of course, is continuing, and there may well be important announcements forthcoming from Rainey, Gorman and others. Some of the pottery itself is on display now at the Brooklyn Museum, the Newark Museum and the Cleveland Museum, among others. Martin Lerner has acquired a couple of examples for research purposes at the Metropolitan, and he says he is on the lookout for four or five superb (and legal) Ban Chieng pots for display. When he finds them, considering the fact that the Metropolitan recently sold a prominent linen manufacturer the right to reproduce patterns from its collection on sheets and pillow cases, it may well be that at least a few Americans will find themselves being lulled to sleep by the swirling, magical markings of early man. ■