

# A Case History: Ban Chiang

of origin, for instance, but small portable works of art were traded in antiquity and, depending on their rarity or importance, should be exchangeable. Many of these were actually made for export.

Japan has, probably, the sanest antiquities-export laws because Japan has an intense national pride. There, scholars and experts are honored by appointment to cultural heritage committees — they are not paid. They are guardians of a sacred trust. Not one of them would dream of betraying that trust. National treasures are not exportable. Antiquities on the other hand are ranked according to specific rarity and cultural importance. Antique art may be owned, traded, and sold abroad, depending upon its uniqueness or importance to Japanese culture. Thus great Japanese art enriches many museums in the world but the best is treasured and appreciated in the Japanese homeland. Japan also assiduously collects ancient art from other places in the world, thereby enriching the Japanese people immeasurably.

Our country is an ethnic melting pot and all of the peoples who make up the face of America are entitled to see and study the heritage of their ancestors. This is especially true of the millions of Americans with a Latin background. Collectors have assembled and saved such international patrimony to the great benefit of our nation. As a museum curator I have acquired smaller items of great quality — avoiding monumental or architectural pieces. The Pre-Columbian art in The Art Museum at Princeton is of high quality and each piece exemplifies the particular culture it represents. It is a teaching collection in a teaching museum. Quality replaces monumental size.

By assembling such a collection, I feel that I have contributed to the educational capabilities of Princeton University without in any way making the slightest dent in the patrimony of any Latin American country. Rather, I feel that I have carried the aesthetic message of those great cultures into the consciousness of modern American civilization.

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## by Chester F. Gorman

I have been asked to present the case history of the looting and reconstruction of Ban Chiang, a major Southeast Asian archaeological site. The history is not old; Ban Chiang became known only during the middle 1960s, yet by 1972, five or six years later, no major undisturbed areas of the site were left intact. In spite of this, Ban Chiang provides some of the most interesting data for understanding of Asian prehistory, as well as a case history in the development of organized looting. It is not often that a site reveals totally unknown, yet advanced and innovative cultures, and there are few sites in the world that span six thousand years, from the late Stone Age through the beginning of the Historic Periods. Sites matching the size, richness, and preservation of Ban Chiang are rare. It is one kilometer long by one-half kilometer wide, and raises seven meters above the surrounding fields. It contains habitation layers and over fifteen thousand burials, many of them well- to lavishly-appointed. In many cases, even wood, fiber, and silk have been preserved over the last four to five thousand years. Ban Chiang is indeed a rare and beautiful site. Unfortunately, the ways in which it has been and is still being looted are common and in many ways grotesque.

Ban Chiang, both the current village and the archaeological site, is located on the northern basin of the Korat Plateau, a high rolling plain comprising northeastern Thailand. It was first listed as an archaeological site in 1960 by an inspector of the Thai Fine Arts Department, region 7. In 1966, the village was visited by Steven Young, an undergraduate student who was impressed by the antiquities he saw, and carried some vessels and shards back to his Thai hostess in Bangkok. His hostess, a wealthy, titled philanthropist and collector, at once appreciated the beauty and uniqueness, if not the scientific value, of the material. However, his hostess did have scientifically-minded friends, and one, Elizabeth Lyons, then with the Ford Foundation in Bangkok, arranged to have some of the shards dated by the thermoluminescence method at the University of Pennsylvania. The resulting fourth- and fifth-millennium BC dates were released in 1970, and were startling. The discovery was unique and spectacular in Asia; but in universal

terms also, it was very old. During the late 1960s, the National Museum in Bangkok focused its attention on the site, and it was visited by a number of museum officials. Test excavations were carried out by the Thai Fine Arts Department in 1967, and again in 1972. In 1973, joint Thai Fine Arts Department and University of Pennsylvania excavations began, and they continued through 1976. From mid-1976 through this last summer (1980), we have reconstructed, analyzed, and computerized over 16 tons of Ban Chiang artifactual material. Several articles have appeared, and two books, as well as a monograph series, are in the final stages of preparation. Throughout our joint program, the elegance of the site has elicited efforts for similar elegance in excavation, analysis, and publication. Where our efforts have produced less than elegant results, the fault has been ours, and not the site's, even in its battered condition.

The Ban Chiang material has supported and greatly enhanced the view that Southeast Asia was an early and innovative center of cultural development. From what was considered a backward area, which advanced culturally only through borrowing from India or China — hence the name Indochina — Southeast Asia is now contributing data of fundamental importance to the study of the origins of domestication and the origins of metallurgy as they occurred throughout the world. We suggest that rice was domesticated in Southeast Asia, and that metallurgy in this area may also have been of indigenous origin.

What kinds of data are needed to generate — let alone prove — such hypotheses? (Hypotheses which, I might add, are opposite to all traditional archaeological reconstructions.) What we need are actual remains: the plant remains or their impressions, the actual metal artifacts, and the crucibles and molds used to make them. However, the mere artifacts, even when found and reconstructed, could date to almost any time period: no one doubts that rice and bronze were found in early Southeast Asia. The question is, were the technologies developed by Southeast Asians? Or were they acquired by Southeast Asians from foreign centers — centers of higher cultural development, such as India, China, or even the Near East? To answer these questions, we must have these artifacts

*archaeological contexts.* For:

a) the contexts denote associations;  
b) contexts through associations denote age; and  
c) the contexts through associations, which span time, delineate an archaeological sequence. Only by studying such sequences, often comparatively, can one hope to answer archaeology's most important questions: how did cultures emerge and develop in different parts of the world? How can such developments be explained? And what can be said of the nature of contacts between such cultures? In short, without excellent records, *there is no archaeology.* On huge, rich, multi-phased sites such as Ban Chiang, contextual relationships assume even greater importance. For without close stratigraphic control, the artifacts can float through several distinct phases, and through several thousands of years.

I will now turn to a short series of slides which illustrates the Ban Chiang sequence, first as a well-documented information sequence anchored firmly in context and sequence; and secondly, as an even greater wealth of looted and plundered information, floating in both space and time.

To reiterate, Ban Chiang is on the Korat Plateau in Northeastern Thailand. We have some 300 sites in a broad arc across the northern part of that plateau. The area is rich in mineral resources, and is very favorable for rice agriculture. The mound of Ban Chiang is about one kilometer long, half a kilometer wide, and seven meters above the surrounding paddies. In the center are the two excavations of the site: the first begun in 1974 and the second in 1975. The area of our 1975 excavations is long and narrow because it is dug under a road, one of the few areas left that had not been completely looted by the villagers.

The site is about four to five meters deep, and totally built up at this point on the debris of human occupation. It is separated into six very distinct and well-dated phases which go from the early Stone Age into the historic occupation.

Red-on-buff painted pottery from the upper layers is what first drew all the attention to Ban Chiang. This pottery was dated, incorrectly, by thermoluminescence to between 3500 and 4500 BC. We now know it to date

much later than that, and to be associated with a very ordinary phase of Ban Chiang, the late Iron Age.

Down two phases from the phase associated with the red and white pottery were found a number of burials covered with pottery and containing many kinds of small finds — a wealth of cultural material. This phase dates from about 1600 to about 1200 BC; it has been called the Om Kaeo Phase because of the very diagnostic quality of all the pieces of pottery from this phase, which have never been found beneath nor above that phase. In a series of Om Kaeo burials from 1974, we found a wealth of bronze, and we expected to find bronze in 1975. I am going to focus now on the metals in order to show how important it is to have very good contextual information on such otherwise small and insignificant finds as objects of bronze. A typical burial in this phase contains a type of pottery — incised and painted red which is only found in this phase, and is highly diagnostic. We also found a very characteristic carinated white buff pottery, also diagnostic of this phase. A close-up shows two pots that were broken, along with many others, and spread over the corpses when they were buried some 1600 to 1200 years BC.

One burial in the phase, that of a small child, probably female, contained several pieces of jewelry. Visible are the lower jaw, upper arm, bracelets; lower arm, bracelet; upper right arm, bracelet; lower right arm, bracelet. In 1974, we uncovered considerable findings of bronze in these Om Kaeo Phase burials. What is unusual about this bronze is its association with iron, and a very unusual iron. The burial is no doubt that of a wealthy child, for her jewelry is iron. I will show you next the bracelet from the left arm. It is a beautiful cast bronze bracelet with small bosses, and around the outside, twisted and wrapped, is a piece of wrought iron. I think this exemplifies the bi-metallic tradition of this phase. Iron must just have appeared on the Korat Plateau. It is a very early date for iron, one of the earliest dates anywhere in the world for archaeologically-recovered iron. Iron was used by this culture as an ornamental metal. So in this phase, we have both good quality tin-bronzes, and the first appearance of terrestrial wrought iron.

Another finding of these excavations was several crucibles

which have dross adhering to the inside. In addition, we found ovens, molds, and ingots; almost the whole repertoire of artifacts needed for the metallurgical technology. It is indeed rare to find these kinds of materials in close association in an archaeological site.

Here are pieces of two spearheads from Ban Chiang, both from the same phase, of cast iron with forged terrestrial iron blades, with cast-on bronze sockets. The first thing I did when I returned from Thailand in 1975 was to section these pieces and run analyses on them at our science labs at the University of Pennsylvania. There have been a few other bi-metallic pieces like this found in China, where they supposedly date to around 1000 BC; they are sometimes referred to as early Shang bi-metallic pieces. The Chinese pieces are all made from meteoritic iron. These Ban Chiang pieces, however, are made from forged terrestrial iron — a very different technology, and a very sophisticated one.

At the bottom of one of our squares, we came across a number of post-holes and a number of intercut burials. I want to call your attention to two important burials. They both contain crucial information, but in this case, some of their evidence has been lost at the site through disturbances. A small burial of a juvenile (burial 38) had been cut by a post-hole from above, but the feet are still intact on the far side. In the slide, you can see a leg bone, two leg bones, extending from the post hole, of about five inches diameter. The remainder of the skeleton extends from the opposite side of the hole; the head is on the other side. This is one of the most important early burials found.

I call your attention to some pieces right next to the post hole. There we found two very low-lying bronze anklets with the tibia and fibula still inside. The legs, which I showed you previously, are associated with another cranium from an *in situ* fully articulated burial dating to some time around 2500 BC.

I will now discuss a circular flexed burial (burial 76) found in a level beneath the previous skeleton. You can just make out the burial fill. I have half-sectioned the original burial cut. There is a beaker-shaped pot here and the cranium is just coming up. We only found these beakers and flexed burials near the bottom of the site. Under that

burial, under that cranium, we found a bronze spearhead near the hands of the skeleton. It is our lowest piece of bronze. From metallurgical analysis, we have shown it was cast, and that it was made from an alloy of 2.51% tin or thereabouts. A very low-tin bronze. What does that tell us?

At Ban Chiang, through our careful unravelling of the sequence with scientific excavation, we can demonstrate technological development in the metallurgical tradition. First we have the low tin-bronze spearpoint found in the flexed burial. Subsequently, the bronzes have a tin content of about 12% as found in the anklets noted for burial 38. Above these in the Om Kaeo phase a bi-metallic tradition appears with iron used as an ornamental metal, much as it was in Europe and Egypt when iron first appeared in those sequences. I have seen iron filagree inlaid into gold. The Chinese often made gold sheets to protect iron blades. Iron is very rare and very valuable. Here we have iron appearing much the same way in mainland Southeast Asia and at an earlier date than China or India and comparable with similar dates from the Old World. Are we dealing with an earlier development? Are we dealing with contacts? To answer these questions, we need the contexts and we need the sequences.

Finally, at the very bottom of the site, we found a number of burials associated with a very diverse and very beautiful black, burnished pottery. From its placement in our sequence, we know that it must have appeared in a metal-using phase.

In addition to a sequence of ceramics and metals, a scientific excavation produces information on more intangible aspects of ancient life, such as diet. Thus, a good stratified sample of all the dirt which we excavated — of which there were tons — was sent through a battery of machines, from which we extracted small animal remains and rice and other plant material. From the material caught in our sieves and taken from the site, from top to bottom, and working with a rice geneticist and a paleobiologist, we have been able to reconstruct the development of the domestication of rice over the last 6000 years on the Korat Plateau.

Now, I will show you what a village excavation looks like. When we first came into Ban Chiang, the villagers

were digging under their houses and gardens. They soon found that they were paid the most money for particular kinds of pottery, and so they would send tunnels down, send these shafts down until they hit an area which was roughly at the depth of that phase, and then they would tunnel out. Here is one tunnel, going into a whole area of the black pottery phase.

Often pieces turn up, such as I am now showing you, not from Ban Chiang, but from other sites nearby. I am showing you a piece of the early black incised material, another type which I've never seen, with open-beaker form, resembling pieces from my second phase up. I can look at this material and have some idea of where it fits within the Ban Chiang sequence. But I have no idea of what went with it.

Three very nice pieces which I now show you were out for a collector to look at and a Thai student of mine took the pictures. With this group, he photographed two very beautifully made bronze bracelets. They came from a burial which evidently had bracelets and anklets and other very unusual bronze pieces, a very rich burial. I don't know what phase it was from, and I have no idea of what went with it.

I want to talk just a little about fakes. I have illustrations of Ban Chiang fakes that were made in the village right next to Ban Chiang, completely from scratch, but using the same clays. I have had neutron activation studies done at Brookhaven Laboratory on these pieces and on a series of all the local clays in the area. I can tell you that this was made locally. These pieces are made from the same clay, decorated with the same designs, and worked with the same material as the original pieces. Some fakes are made using an old original piece and attaching it with a resin to a new piece, which is then painted. Some of these pieces, which are half-old and half-new, are very hard to distinguish from the original.

In the photograph of these pieces, I draw your attention also to these beautiful bronze artifacts, and bits of bones, rollers, and beads, which just come in willy-nilly, to be sold.

Finally, here is a photograph showing the pigment that was used for the painting of some of the new pieces.

I have tried to show you what the site looked like when we excavated it carefully and cautiously. We have been able thus to discover a great deal about that prehistoric culture. The villagers on

the other hand have looted the sites and made most of them almost useless for any type of modern, reasonably scientific excavation. What exactly started the villagers on the path to looting is one of the things that I want to talk about. After living on the mound for over 200 years, and after digging latrines and thousands of substantial postholes to support their houses, and after planting their trees and gardens, they most certainly knew what lay under the mound's surface. Yet they never systematically dug for the remains. The Thai test excavations of 1967 provided interesting if inconclusive results. Still, there was no major looting. Some local collectors and a few foreigners did visit Ban Chiang and acquired samples of the bronze and pottery. But this was nothing in view of what was to come. By 1970, the results of the thermoluminescence dates had been reported to Thailand, and rumors were passed about that the pottery had been dated between 3500 and 4600 years BC. As word of this passed to the Bangkok circle of collectors and dealers, many of them immediately organized Ban Chiang pottery market trips. Let us return now to 1970, and the first reported trip to Ban Chiang, made by the wealthy hostess of the young university student, Steven Young. She returned to Bangkok with over 100 vessels in her own car, and contracts to local villagers to dig and sell more. Other wealthy Thais joined the fashionable trek, and so collectors and antique dealers in Bangkok had access to Ban Chiang antiquities. For the poor subsistence farmers of Ban Chiang, all this attention was a blessing. They used their new income as many of us would have used it. Children went to better schools, and for longer periods of time. Real doctors were consulted for illnesses, and funds were put aside for a rainy day. . . the day when their supply of pots would be exhausted. Between 1970 and 1972 Ban Chiang was subjected to its most intensive looting. In 1972, the Thai Fine Arts Department petitioned the National Executive Council for Thailand to forbid excavations by the villagers. The Prime Minister pronounced it illegal to sell or to transport Ban Chiang material. In early 1972, His Majesty the King sponsored a small excavation in Ban Chiang, and later the Fine Arts Department opened a second Ban Chiang Excavation. This official presence and activity in Ban Chiang

# New Challenges To Africa's Artistic Heritage

by Arnold Rubin

For a total of about four years between 1964 and 1966, and between 1969 and 1971, I was engaged in art historical field-research in the Benue River Valley area of northeastern Nigeria. My work was in the nature of a survey, essentially an attempt to trace the distribution of types and styles of sculpture at that time little known to Western scholars. These two periods of research coincided with the beginning and end of the Biafran conflict. For students of the traditional arts of Africa, I believe they bracket something of a watershed in the matters which concern us here today, ushering in a completely new set of economic, social, and cultural circumstances. For my purposes, it meant that much of the art I had gone back to Nigeria to study in 1969 was no longer there. It was in Paris or London or New York. Here is one of several examples I could cite: in 1966 I had sought unsuccessfully to purchase one particular Jukun sculpture for the Department of Antiquities of Nigeria. By 1969 the sculpture in question was in a French private collection. In my opinion, it is the key monument of an entire regional tradition. If it had to leave its village, it should have entered the Nigerian Museum. I say this without a great deal of enthusiasm, incidentally, for reasons which will emerge a bit later.

Insofar as I can reconstruct the sequence of events involved, the figure had been secretly sold by its custodian, who claimed that it had been stolen. Along with hundreds of other works of Nigerian art, it apparently had been smuggled out of Nigeria via Cameroun. In Nigeria during the late 1960s, all available manpower was being poured into the war, and the country's control of its long boundary had deteriorated. Dealer-friends tell me that the African art market was actually depressed for a period of about two years in the early 1970s because of an avalanche of first-rate and absurdly inexpensive material — which, however, "hooked" a vast new pool of collectors, dealers, and investors. The result has been a steady rise in demand — and prices — since then, and a consequent increase in the suction operating on Africa's traditional art.

It will have become apparent that I propose to present a highly personal perspective on the subject of this symposium as the basis for some generalizations. I won't be talking about

What sanctions can one invoke against a victimless crime — a crime in which everyone gains except the discipline of archaeology and ultimately the countries whose cultural heritage is dismembered and strewn across the world? Whatever those sanctions are, the Ban Chiang case clearly indicates they should be directed against collectors and dealers. For as they created the market for antiquities, so they insure the destruction of the Ban Chiang related ancient sites. *Chester F. Gorman was Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and Associate Curator in charge of the University Museum's South and Southeast Asia section until his death in June 1981. This paper has been edited by Joyce White, a PhD student of Dr. Gorman's with assistance from Deborah Wong, a work study student with the Ban Chiang project. Continued analysis and final publication will now be under the direction of Dr. Charles Higham of the University of Otago, New Zealand. An exhibition and catalogue of Ban Chiang artifacts, initiated by Dr. Gorman under sponsorship of the University Museum and the Smithsonian Traveling Exhibition Service, is scheduled to open at the University Museum during 1982-83 and will travel to seven other locations in the United States before returning to Thailand. In any forthcoming publications, the chronology and data of Ban Chiang may be somewhat revised; however, these revisions will not fundamentally alter the significance of this site to world prehistory, nor Dr. Gorman's comments on the destructive impact of looting on the search for knowledge of our past.*

slowed the illegal trade in antiquities. But in fact the villagers had just about exhausted the upper layers of the site. The Royal excavation was conducted on temple grounds. And the second excavation by the Thai Fine Arts Department was under a road, the same as ours would later be. These were the only undisturbed surfaces remaining. Faced with an official presence, and a rapidly dwindling supply of pots, the Ban Chiang villagers had two options: first, to fan out and prospect for antiquities under other mound villages nearby; or two, to manufacture fakes and sell them as the real thing. They of course chose both. There were many such mounds around Ban Chiang, and with their experience, the Ban Chiang villagers soon located most of the nearby sites. At first, the material was transported to Ban Chiang for sale as genuine Ban Chiang artifacts. But soon, it became apparent that collectors and dealers were as interested in the new sites as they were in Ban Chiang. They were then escorted to these new sites, and villagers and dealers in the surrounding area were sensitized to a new reality. Other villagers began mining their own mounds, and dealers and collectors scoured practically every village within a 100 km radius of Ban Chiang.

Thai and foreign society figures were split in their reactions. Some offered money to have the sites properly excavated. Others used their status and fortunes to destroy totally some of the most important sites on the Korat Plateau. One small site I visited in 1975 had been trenched through the middle by a Thai collector: black ceramics and quantities of bone and bronze littered the surface. It was the earliest Ban Chiang type yet seen. For security reasons involving looters we were unable to excavate the remains and a year later it too was completely plundered. In the last five years of survey no unlooted site has been located.

The market for Ban Chiang material set in motion the systematic plundering of the sites, and it continues. The high social status and/or relatively immense wealth of many collectors puts them above the law and they operate their own "excavations." Dealers offer poverty-stricken farmers a relative fortune for otherwise meaningless pots long buried and forgotten under village houses and gardens.