

On Post-Hellenistic Influence in South-East Asia

Based on New Materials Recently Found in Southern Thailand and around Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia

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Abstract

For a long time South-East Asia was thought to be out of the reaches of the influence of Hellenistic and Post-Hellenistic cultures. However these notions need to be changed now, especially due to new findings in Thailand and Cambodia. Analyzing different types of archaeological objects (some types of beads, Greco-Roman cameos, Roman coins *etc.*) we come to the conclusion that continental South-East Asia experienced various kinds of influence from Post-Hellenistic cultures, which can be traced not only on the sea shores, but also in the inner regions of the Indochina Peninsula. The relationship of some objects to Central Asia, gives us grounds to suppose that, together with India, this region could be one of the inter-links between both cultures, though we suppose the sea route as the main way of the spread of Post-Hellenistic cultural influence to South-East Asia.

Keywords

Post-Hellenistic cultures – Thailand – Cambodia – Oc Eo – Phum Snay – Khao Sam Kaeo – Klongtom – cameo – Roman coins – face beads

* Miho Museum, 300, Momodani, Tashiro, Shigaraki-cho, Koka-shi, Shiga-ken, 529-1814 Japan.

Introduction

Although the prehistoric archaeological research in South-East Asia began in the second half of the 19th century,¹ it still persists in the initial stage of development. War in Vietnam, large quantity of unexploded bombs left in Laos, a long period of civil war in Cambodia remained the tremendous obstacle to the archaeological work in the region until recent time and in some places research is still impossible because of mines and unexploded bombs. In fact, after the Second World War there was no continuous systematic archaeological work in continental South-East Asia except for North Vietnam; after 1975 it became possible in South Vietnam and only in the 2000-s it increased in Cambodia. In Thailand, after the discovery of the Early Bronze and Iron Ages in the beginning of the 1970-s the prehistoric surveys by foreign and Thai archaeologists became frequent, but they are still far from the level of frequency of China or North Vietnam. That is the reason why the archaeological discoveries of recent years (especially in the case of Cambodia and southern Thailand) are changing cardinally our notions about South-East Asia and about its relationship with foreign cultures as well.

The Subject of the Present Research

The objects of the present paper are the traces of Hellenistic and Post-Hellenistic culture (*i.e.* Greek and Roman culture, which spread in Asia in Hellenistic period) in South-East Asia. The three main sources of this research are the material of recent occasional findings around Nakhon Sri Thammarat in southern Thailand gathered by Thai researchers, material of the author's own excavations in north-western Cambodia,² material of illegal "excavations"

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- 1 The beginning of the prehistoric archaeology in the Indochina Peninsula, which became the subject of the present research, should be definitely related to the activities of Jean Moura (1827-1885), the representative of the French Protectorate at the Court of the King of Cambodia in 1868-1876, who accomplished the collection of Neolithic and Bronze Age material from the Samron Sen Site. Despite this the archaeological research and especially excavations in the colonial period, carried out by the Indochina Geological Service and French Far-Eastern School (École Française d'Extrême-Orient) were few and concentrated on the territory of modern Vietnam. The same situation existed in the Kingdom of Thailand, where until the end of 1960-s the archaeological research was carried out by a small group of mainly U.S. and British prehistorians.
 - 2 The author has been carrying out the research of the sites and materials from north-west Cambodia since 2003. In January-March 2007 the author accomplished the excavation of the Phum Snay archaeological site.

in north-western Cambodia (Banteay Menchey, Oddar Menchey, Siem Reap Provinces of this kingdom) (Maps 1-2).

For the comparison with the archaeological material unearthed from South-East Asia the author used material from the Miho Museum and other Japanese and foreign museums and collections. The purpose of this study is to distinguish and classify the main material of Greco-Roman cultural origin in South-East Asia and to think of the possible routs of cultural exchange.

The Research Background

As it is widely known, sculpture in Khmer art is seen only from the 5th century AD, but it has a developed level already. Also, in the sculpture of the early period (6th-7th centuries) we can see some Greek cultural traits (Fig. 1). This could be seen as an occasional coincidence, but in 1942 and 1944 a French archaeologist Louis Malleret (1901-1970) found Greco-Roman cameos and Roman coins of the Imperial period during the excavations of the Oc Eo site in the Mekong Delta (presently An Giang Province of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam) (Fig. 2). Malleret's discovery, published in the end of 1940-s and the beginning of 1950-s attracted the attention of the scientific circles of that time.³ After the liberation of southern Vietnam in 1975, Vietnamese archaeologists continued discovering Hellenistic style cameos and Roman coins. This gave them grounds to think of direct or indirect contacts between the Mekong Delta and Hellenistic and Post-Hellenistic states, but the scale and nature of these contacts was unclear.

New Material from Southern Thailand

The discovery of new material showing the influence of Greco-Roman culture in South-East Asia is thought to be influenced by the tsunami, which followed the Sumatra-Indian Ocean major earthquake in 2006. It is said that during that time local inhabitants in southern Thailand coastal area were attracted by beads, coins and other artifacts brought by tsunami, and started digging in the ground, although earlier illegal excavations had also taken place. Also in the same region the French Far-Eastern School conducts the excavations in the Khao Sam Kaeo site, but the materials are few compared to those of the illegal excavations. To prevent the traffic of the artifacts abroad the Suthi

³ Malleret 1947-1951; 1951-1952.



MAP 1 *Archaeological sites in southern Thailand from: Pongpanich 2009, 88, 236).*



MAP 2 *Cambodia. By S. Lapteff.*



FIGURE 1 *Early Khmer sculpture. 6th-7th centuries AD. National Museum of Cambodia (Phnom Penh) (photo by S. Lapteff).*



FIGURE 2 *Greco-Roman cameos, Roman coins and others, found by Malleret from the Oc Eo site in the Mekong Delta (reproduced from: Malleret 1947-1950, pls. XLVIII, XLIX).*

Ratana Foundation, based in Nakhon Si Thammarat started to buy the artifacts from local people in order to build the museum, and now a large part of the material is preserved there. In 2010-2011, due to the cooperation of Dr. Bunchar Pongpanich, curator of the foundation, the author got the chance to study some of these artifacts.

Including two sites in the southern coastal area of Myanmar's Tenasserim, close to southern Thailand, the total amount of sites is 26,⁴ among them there are 8 sites or groups of sites which became the subject of artifacts' collecting by the foundation. Besides the excavation by the French Far-Eastern School at the Khao Sam Kaeo site, there are also Ta Chana, Laem Pho and Chaiya, Takuapa

4 Pongpanich 2009, 190-197.

and Muang Thong, Kuan Luk Pad and Klongtom, Phu Khao Thong, Bang Kluay, Kuraburi, and places around them. Khao Sam Kaeo, Ta Chana, Laem Pho and Chaiya are close to the Bay of Siam, other sites are not far from the Andaman Sea, and almost all of them are situated near rivers banks (Map 1). According to B. Pongpanich the majority of the sites can be dated by their inventories to the 1st century BC-8th century AD.⁵ In fact, it is difficult to say to what degree this dating is correct. However, from Khao Sam Kaeo comes some material of Han Period (3rd century BC-3rd century AD) China (pottery *etc.*), which can be dated for sure. Greco-Roman material is found from the Klongtom, Ta Chana, Takuapa, Kho Khor Khao, Phu Khao Thong, Ban Kluay sites.

The most frequent type of objects found in southern Thailand which has a relation with the Near and Middle East are beads. Among the beads the type of “eye beads” (Figs. 3-5) are usually thought to originate from western Asia.⁶ In western Asia the “eye beads” are known from the 6th-4th centuries BC (Figs. 6-7), later they spread in Iran and China. Chinese “eye beads”, however, have their local traits, which are not seen in southern Thailand. This shows that the “eye beads” from southern Thailand are made in the Near East or copying the Near Eastern models.

One more type of bead, specific for the Near and Middle East, human face beads, is also found in southern Thailand (Fig. 8). This type is thought to originate from the Mediterranean area, with the center in Phoenicia. Phoenician beads are older, dated to the 5th-3rd centuries BC,⁷ but the type found in southern Thailand is similar to the beads from the Mediterranean, dated to the 1st century BC-1st century AD (Fig. 9). The same type of human face beads are found in Pompeii and Herculaneum in Italy.⁸

The place of the production of beads of the above mentioned two types found in South-East Asia is unknown, but there is no evidence that they may be made locally, and it is better to suppose that they are imported products. These two types are likely to have spread from West to East, reaching continental South-East Asia in the beginning of the AD era.

In southern Thailand many Greco-Roman style cameos with engravings have been found. Among them are the cameos with heads of a woman (?), man and the full body carving of a female deity from the Ta Chana site; Perseus and Medusa, the Palladium seizure during the Trojan War, the abduction of Ganymede, the Aphrodite and Ares myth on engraved cameos from Klongtom;

5 Pongpanich 2009, 230-231.

6 Yoshimizu 1989, 10-13; Taniichi & Kudou 1999, 13-15.

7 Taniichi & Kudou 1999, 16-17.

8 Lankton 2003, 49, 57.



FIGURE 3 *Eye-beads found in southern Thailand. Suthi Ratana Foundation (photo by S. Lapteff).*



FIGURE 4 *Eye-beads and Indo-Pacific beads from southern Thailand. Suthi Ratana Foundation (photo by S. Lapteff).*



FIGURE 5 *Eye-beads and others from southern Thailand. From the Takuapa (left) and Kho Khor Khao (right) sites. Suthi Ratana Foundation (reproduced from: Pongpanich 2009, 132-133).*



FIGURE 6 *Eye-beads from West Asia. 6th-4th centuries BC (reproduced from: Yoshimizu 1989, 11).*



FIGURE 7 *Eye-beads from West Asia. 6th-4th centuries BC (reproduced from: Yoshimizu 1989, 10).*



FIGURE 8 *Human face beads, found in southern Thailand. The upper row is from Klongtom site. Suthi Ratana Foundation (photo by S. Lapteff).*

horse, male deity, woman's head carved on cameos from Bang Kluay and Phu Khao Thong (Figs. 10-18). As some of them are preserved fragmentarily only, the scene depicted on these cameos cannot be reconstructed, but their appearance shows that they for sure are objects of the Greek cultural area. Cameos depicting Greek myths deserve special attention. The myths of Perseus and Medusa, the Trojan War and the abduction of Ganymede were probably not known to the people in South-East Asia. These cameos were made in the countries of Greek cultural tradition and then imported to South-East Asia.

Among other artifacts, some of the metal objects have traits peculiar to Hellenistic and Post-Hellenistic Central Asia. The golden decorative figurine of an animal with raised forehead, found at the Phu Khao Thong site, looks similar to animal rhytons by its shape (Fig. 19). A bead with a similar golden figurine decoration was found in Tajikistan (Fig. 20). In the region to the north-west of Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia a tub-shaped bead decorated with metal at both ends (Fig. 21) was also found. The bead with golden and silver endings from Tajikistan, found at Sirin in the Leninabad region is dated to the 1st-3rd centuries AD, and the Cambodian bead to the 1st-7th centuries, coming from the Phum Snay archaeological site.

At the Bang Kluay site in southern Thailand many golden foil plaques (Fig. 22) were found. Golden foil plaques with images are known from the



FIGURE 9 *Human face beads. Mediterranean region. 1st century BC-1st century AD. Okayama Municipal Museum of Near Eastern Art (reproduced from: Yoshimizu 1989, 34).*

Oc Eo archaeological culture (1st-7th centuries AD)⁹ in the Mekong Delta (Figs. 23-24). Similar plaques of golden foil with images are typical for an

⁹ Lê Xuân Diệm, Đào Linh Côn & Võ Sĩ Khải 1995, 430-438. Some sites have radiocarbon dates.



FIGURE 10 *Greek style cameos found in southern Thailand. Suthi Ratana Foundation (photo by S. Lapteff).*



FIGURE 11 *Fragment of a Greek style cameo from the Ta Chana site. Suthi Ratana Foundation (reproduced from: Pongpanich 2009, 110).*

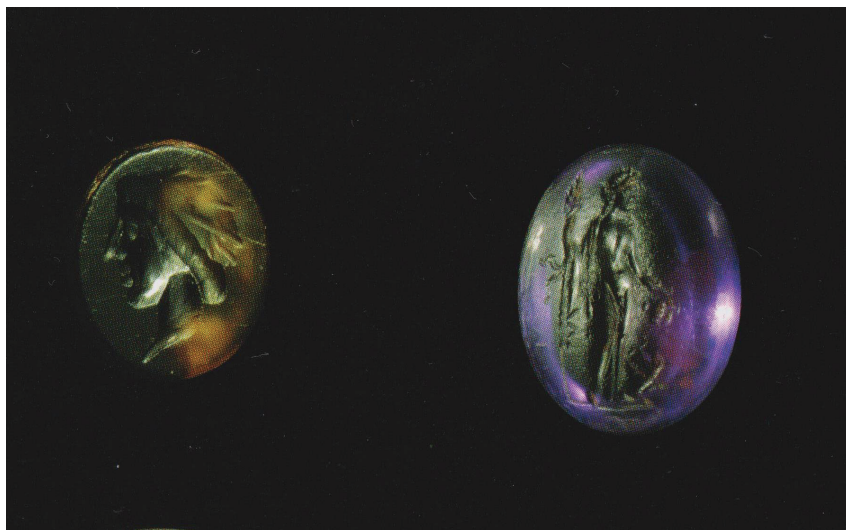


FIGURE 12 *Greek style cameos from the Ta Chana site. Suthi Ratana Foundation (reproduced from: Pongpanich 2009, 110).*



FIGURE 13 *Cameo depicting Perseus and Medusa and its imprint, found at the Klongtom site. Suthi Ratana Foundation (reproduced from: Pongpanich 2009, 148).*



FIGURE 14 *Cameo depicting the seizure of Paladium during the Trojan War, found at the Klongtom site. Suthi Ratana Foundation (reproduced from: Pongpanich 2009, 149).*



FIGURE 15 *Cameo depicting the abduction of Ganymede and its imprint, found at the Klongtom site. Suthi Ratana Foundation (reproduced from: Pongpanich 2009, 150).*



FIGURE 16 *Cameo depicting Aphrodite and Ares, found at the Klongtom site. Suthi Ratana Foundation (reproduced from: Pongpanich 2009, 152).*



FIGURE 17 *Greek style cameos, found at Phu Khao Thong. Suthi Ratana Foundation (reproduced from: Pongpanich 2009, 160).*



FIGURE 18 *Greek style cameos and their imprints, found at Klongtom. Suthi Ratana Foundation (reproduced from: Pongpanich 2009, 81, 173).*



FIGURE 19 *Golden bead ending, found at the Phu Khao Thong site, southern Thailand. Suthi Ratana Foundation (reproduced from: Pongpanich 2009, 159).*

earlier period (5th-2nd centuries BC)¹⁰ in Central Asia (Ancient Bactria) (Fig. 25). In both regions animals for sacrifice, gifts for gods, are depicted on the golden foil. Very probably, in both cases these were offering plaques.

In southern Thailand many coins were found. Together with Chinese coins, Roman golden coins are also seen quite often (Fig. 26).

Attention should be paid to the fact that in southern Thailand, together with artifacts belonging to Greco-Roman culture, objects related to Bactria are also found. This shows the possibility of contacts with Central Asia, which received Hellenistic influence (Kushan Empire *etc.*).

¹⁰ Cat. Nara 1988, 259.



FIGURE 20 *Bead with golden and silver endings. Found at Sirin fortress in the Leninabad Region, Tajikistan. 3rd-1st centuries BC. Institute of History of Tajikistan, Academy of Sciences (reproduced from: Cat. Nara 1988, 142, 155).*



FIGURE 21 *Bead with golden endings found at Phum Snay in north-western Cambodia. 1st-5th centuries AD. Tranet Collection (photo by S. Lapteff).*



FIGURE 24 Golden foil from the Da Noi site, An Giang Province, southern Vietnam (reproduced from: Lê Xuân Diệm, Đào Linh Côn & Võ Sĩ Khải 1995, col. pls. 21, 28).



FIGURE 25 Golden offering plaques, found from Bactria region, 5th-2nd centuries BC. Miho Museum (reproduced from: Cat. Miho Museum 2002, 94).



FIGURE 26 Roman coins found in southern Thailand. Suthi Ratana Foundation (Left – photo by S. Lapteff, right – reproduced from: Pongpanich 2009, 226).

Materials from the Region around Tonle Sap Lake

The traces of Greco-Roman culture are known in the area around Tonle Sap Lake as well. As mentioned above, this region is almost unstudied and information from it is very fragmentary. The Phum Snay archaeological site, excavated by the author, was found by chance during road construction in 2000 and heavily looted. When the author conducted a preliminary survey in 2006, looking for a place for excavation, he found that all the area except for the village road and a sacred place were dug already. Of course, the material of illegal digging is much richer than that from scientific excavation, but its major part has disappeared abroad. That information about the Phum Snay site has now partly remained is due to the efforts of the then vice-minister of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, H. E. Dr. Michel Tranet, who came to the site often in order to save the looted materials from going abroad. The Tranet Collection in Phnom Penh is the richest one for the prehistoric period in Cambodia.

The Phum Snay site is situated around Snay Village of Rohal Commune in Preah Netr Preah District of Banteay Menchey Province of Cambodia, to the north-west of Tonle Sap Lake (Map 2). This is a multi-level necropolis, which can be dated to the 1st-7th centuries AD.

In the Tranet Collection there are Roman cameos, glass beads decorated with gold, found at the Phum Snay site (Figs. 21, 27). As is shown by chemical analysis beads from lapis-lazuli were found here, though other objects discovered during the author's excavation and from the Tranet collection, which



FIGURE 27 *Greco-Roman style cameo found at Phum Snay in north-western Cambodia and coin from Angkor Borei in south-eastern Cambodia. Tranet Collection (photo by S. Lapteff).*



FIGURE 28 *Lapis-lazuli beads from the Phum Snay site. Tranet Collection (left). Glass fragments, found during excavation (Phum Snay site, Location A, 2007), right (photos by S. Lapteff).*

looked like lapis-lazuli turned out to be glass (Fig. 28).¹¹ This increases the possibility of the role of Bactria, which was the most important supplier of this rare mineral in the ancient period, as the connecting link between countries, which inherited Hellenistic culture and South-East Asia.

There are plenty of so called Indo-Pacific beads found at the Phum Snay site (Fig. 29). They are also numerous in southern Thailand (Fig. 4). Indo-Pacific beads, which received their name from the late Peter Francis, mean

¹¹ Lapteff *et alii* 2012, 8.



a



b



c

FIGURE 29 *Indo-Pacific beads found at the Phum Snay site. Private collection, Siem Reap, Cambodia (a, b) and from the excavation (c) (photos by S. Lapteff).*

cut tomb-shaped microbeads (up to 6 mm) spread in the named region.¹² The place of their possible origin could be the Hindustan Peninsula, and from there Indo-Pacific beads spread to a broad area, being found from East Africa to

¹² Francis 1990, 2.

Korea and Japan. Certainly, as the products of Greco-Roman type, Indo-Pacific beads should be considered as one of the main articles of exchange on the Sea Silk Road, being one of the rare examples of an “opposite direction” influence, from East to West.

Although the materials from the Tonle Sap region are still few, among them there are artifacts similar not only to those from the Mekong Delta, but also to southern Thailand, and their date should be close to those of southern Thailand as well.

As was in the case of the sea shore region, the inland part of South-East Asia experienced the influence of Greco-Roman culture too. This influence, no doubt, came to South-East Asia through India with the help of Indian migrants. This is proved by a large amount of Indian decorative objects, coins, cameos found in southern Thailand. The similar situation can be shown by the presence of the influence from Bactria, close to India. However, the sea route is more likely than the land route as the way of spread of Greco-Roman culture towards inland South-East Asia. The author’s own excavations of the Snay site and other findings show that the Oc Oe culture, discovered by Malleret, continued in north-western Cambodia.¹³ Nevertheless, as the sites in Mekong Delta are richer, there is no doubt that the center of the Oc Oe culture was in the Mekong Delta. The traces of Greco-Roman culture are also more frequent in the Delta. After Malleret’s discovery the finds of Greco-Roman type cameos and Roman coins were continued there by Vietnamese archeologists as well (Fig. 30).

Conclusions

The author supposes that the objects of Greco-Roman culture spread by the maritime route from the Delta via the Mekong to Tonle Sap Lake. If the location of the sites with such findings in southern Thailand is considered, we can propose that the sea routes were prevailing in the spread of Greco-Roman culture in continental South-East Asia. As together with the artifacts of Greco-Roman type a large amount of Indian products are found (adornments, beads, coins, seals), we may think that exchange was going through India. It is important to note the presence of Bactrian type objects in this exchange. Probably, the contacts with Central Asia could have been conducted through India too.

The Greek culture, which spread towards India due to Alexander the Great, later (approximately around 1st-5th centuries AD) reached South-East Asia

¹³ Lapteff 2013, 144-145.

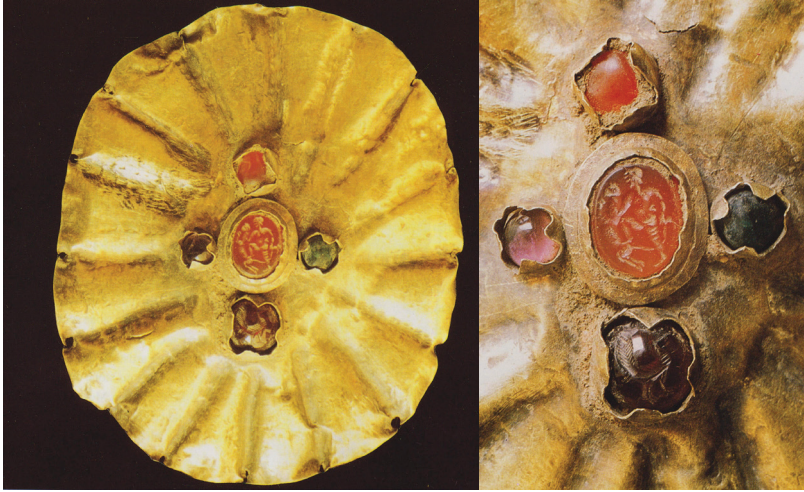


FIGURE 30 Leaf-shaped golden object with inlaid cameos. Oc Eo culture. 7th-8th centuries. Vũ Kim Loc collection, Vietnam (reproduced from: Lê Xuân Diễm & Vũ Kim Lộc 1996, 39, 41).

from India and became a part of the local culture. Although the data is still not numerous, due to the recent discoveries in southern Thailand and in the Mekong Valley new material was obtained, and allows a more thorough examination and study of the external contacts in the region.

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