

Some Problems of Slab Box Stones at Ban Wang Prachop, Tak Province

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Megalithic culture is a common cultural phenomenon found throughout Asia (Kim 1982). This ritual practice had been descended from Neolithic period to the Iron Age. At present, some tribes in Indonesian archipelago still maintain the ritual of megalithic worship (Munandar, 2011). There are many main forms of megalithic such as menhir, dolmen, and slab stone box grave. Most of them were built on the purposes of burial, ancestor worship, supernatural spirit, and sacred space.

In the year 2008, the writer found a lot of slab stone boxes at Ban Wang Prachop and Nai Sien archeological sites located in Wang Prachop Sub-district, Mueang District, Tak Province, Thailand. Slab stone box (like coffin-shaped) made of many phyllite sheets arranged in rectangular shape were found in both of these archeological sites. Some oblations (goods grave) were found inside but no human remains or bone ashes. Therefore, the writer call them “Slab box stone” in order to avoid confusing with the meaning of grave/coffin (Krajaejun, 2009). These slab box stones are categorized in megalithic culture. It was the first time the slab box stones found in Thailand, so they are the significant evidences worthy for discussion in many issues.

Therefore, the main objectives of this article are to explain the slab box stones found in Wang Prachop Sub-district, Mueang District, Tak Province, the ritual practice of slab box making, chronology, and the nearby archeological sites where the slab box stones were also found. As

well as the relationship between the slab box stone cultures found in South-East Asian region.

The Distribution of Archeological Sites

There are 4 archeological sites located in the surrounding areas: Ban Wang Prachop, Nai Sien, Ban Kang Hin, and Ban Nong Rom. All of them located on the west bank of Mae Raka River Basin. This reflects some of the settlement forms; that is, the upstream of Mae Raka River comes from the mountains in the northern part of Tak Province while the downstream flows to Ping River in Kam Pang Pet Province. During the rainy season, there is so much water that causes the plains along both sides of Mae Raka river to flood. On the other hand, during the dry season, the water level is very low. In the past, local people had to dig very deep wells in order to get the water for use during the dry season. The underground water only found on the west bank of the river but on the east bank locals have to dig very deep wells.

In term of geographical area, the west bank of Mae Raka river is lined with small mountains from north to south in parallel with the creek. In comparison to the east bank where there is no mountain and relatively dry, the west bank is more humid. Most of the local habitats are located on the west bank of Mae Raka river because it is more humid, the quality of the soil there is better than those of the east bank, and there is underground water. It can be assumed that the settlement choices of the ancestors are not much different from those of people at present time.

The archeological sites for exploration and excavation can be divided into 2 types: habitats and rituals. All of them explicitly reflect that people in this culture have systematic landscaping. That is, Ban Wang Prachop and Nai Sien archeological sites are located close to each other and the slab box stones were found on both sites (see the map). Almost 100 percent of Ban Wang Prachop archeological site located in the community area which covered 72 square meters. 6 slab box stones were found, but successfully excavated only 5 and the array of stone sheets were also found. On the other hand, at Nai Sien archeological site which is located in

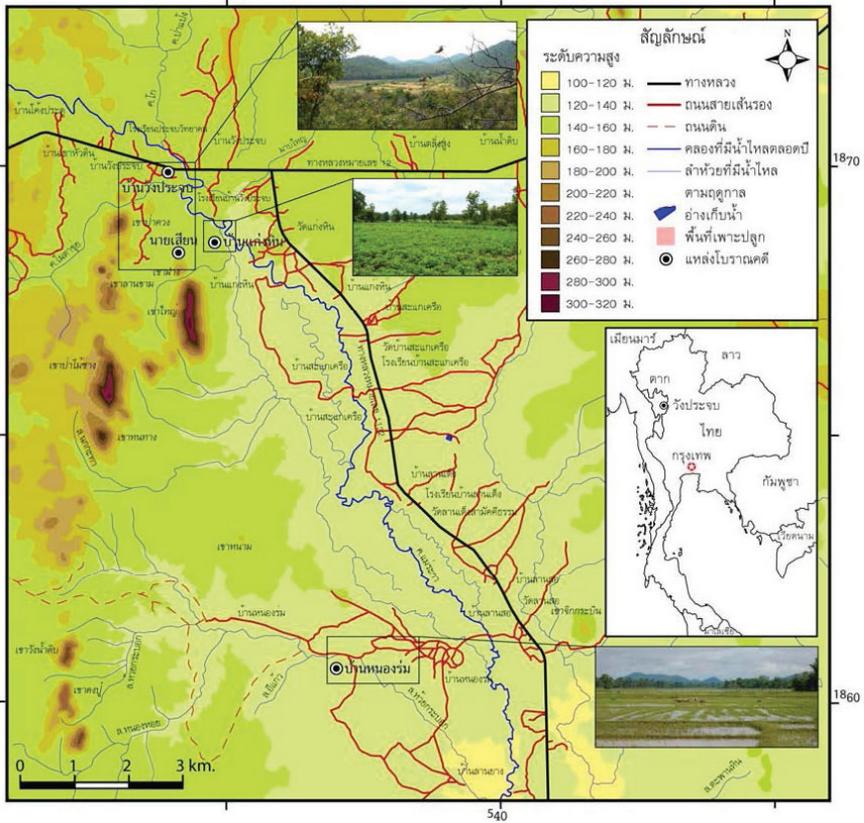


Figure 1 Map of 4 archaeological sites are located at Wang Prachop district.

community forest area, many slab box stones were found, but 2 were excavated with their bodies only.



Figure 2 Ban Wang Prachop archaeological site.



Figure 3 Nai Sien site archaeological site.



Figure 4 The Nai Sien archaeological site is located on Kao Noi hill slope.

Other 2 archeological sites are habitats because no slab box stones were found. The first archeological site is called Ban Kang Hin. The finished and roughly shaped stone axes, pottery, and stone bracelets were found. Similar evidence was found at another site called Ban Nong Rom from three excavation holes. The evidence suggested that this area is residential area because items such as pottery sherds, stone bracelets, round stone ornaments, polished axes, whets, and terracotta beads were found but there was no iron tool.

Ban Kang Hin archeological site might be the habitats of the community area on the north with Ban Wang Prachop and Nai Sien archeological sites as the ritual sites because they are very close by, just approximately 1 kilometer apart from each other. Ban Nong Rom archeological site has not yet found any ritual sites nearby. The thorough exploration is required in the future but it might be difficult because it is a forest area. One of the advantages of this archeological site is that it is located near the phyllite sources used to make slab box stones. It could be assumed that the phyllite sources used to make slab box stones might be moved from some areas near Ban Nong Rom which are located 10 kilometers from Ban Wang Prachop and Nai Sien.

Apart from those 4 archeological sites, the writer has not found any other archeological sites that belong to this cultural group in nearby areas.

The writer hereby groups these archeological sites and calls them “Wang Prachop Culture” because the slab box stones were found here first. According to the locals, over 50 years ago during the construction of Ban Nam Dip-Wang Prachop-Muaeng Road, the same kind of these slab box stones were also found as the tractors ploughed the land near Wang Prachop, but no one was interested in finding out what they were.

Forms of Slab Box Stones and Antiques Found

Slab box stones found in both Ban Wang Prachop and Nai Sien archeological sites were shallowly buried underground, so the rectangular outline made from phyllite stone sheets that composed together into a rectangular-shaped coffin can be seen. Both ends of the boxes were made of one stone slab each. The sides consist of various sizes of slabs lined along the length of the box. All of the slabs on the side of the box were made using cracking technique. The bottoms of the boxes were made of polished square-shaped slabs lined together. The tops were covered with pieces of phyllite remaining from cracking.

The average size of 6 stone boxes/coffins is 220 centimeters. The longest stone boxes/coffins is 243 centimeters long found in Nai Sien archeological site, the average width is 64 centimeters and the height measured from the bottom to the top is 44 centimeters (see Table 1). Some big sized slabs were also used. The biggest one is 72.5 centimeters long. The big slabs were used for the bottoms and the sides. The estimated weight of 1 slab box stone can be as much as 300-400 kilograms. All of them face to the northeastern-southwestern side.

Inside the boxes some antique items like pot and bowl-shaped pottery that were once in perfect condition were found collapsed because of the pressure from the soil. Stone bracelets were found in pieces as if they were broken intentionally. Some of the boxes like no. 3, 27 pieces of stone bracelets were found but many did not come from the same bracelet. Especially, inside the slab box stones of Nai Sien archeological site found spindle whorls and stone beads. These stone beads were made of ivory-white quartz with long slant cut-end cylinder shape. They might be local products

Table 1 Sizes of the slab box stones and the number of stone sheets at Ban Wang Prachop and Nai Sien archeological sites

Site	Slab Box Stone Number	Length (cm.)	Width (cm.)	Height (cm.)	Number of Big Stone Sheets*
Wang Prachop	1	190	70	58	22
	2	236	65	30	25
	3	231	70	52	11
	5	213	84	50	15
Nai Sien	1	243	53	38	26
	2	212	46	36	24
Average	-	220.8	64.6	44	-

Remarks Slab Box Stone No. 4 of Ban Wang Prachop archeological site was not excavated , *Number of Big stone Sheets means the stone sheets placed on both sides and at the bottom of the slab box stone.

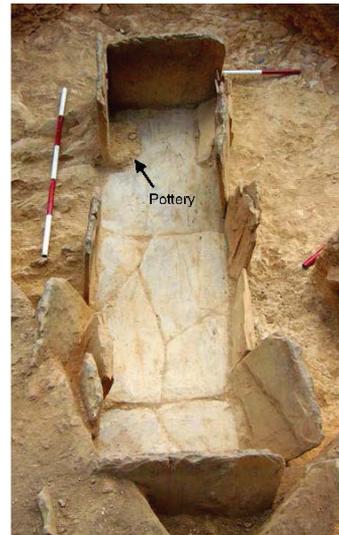


Figure 5 The slab stone box was excavated the first soil layer out, at Ban Wang Prachop.

Figure 6 After the excavation of the slab stone box, a lot of slab fragments and soil were removed. There were only the slab floor and pottery.

or foreign products. The same kind of beads also found in Ban Wang Prachop but they were made of terracotta and dark brown stones. The difference in quantities of the antique items found in the slab box stones reflects the relatively different social status among the owners who made them. For example, in box no. 3 of Ban Wang Prachop 27 pieces of bracelets were found while in box no. 2 of Ban Nai Sien only 2 pieces of pottery and 1 piece of spindle whorl were found. (see Table 2)

Table 2 Types and quantities of the antiques found in the slab box stones

Site	Slab Box Stone Number	Pottery (Pieces)	Stone bracelets sherd	Spindle whorls	Stone beads	Round stone ornaments
Wang Prachop	1	4	1	-	-	-
	2	5	2	-	-	-
	3	2	27	-	-	-
	5	2	-	-	-	-
Nai Sien	1	10	1	-	4	1
	2	2	-	1	-	-
Total	-	25	31	1	4	1



Figure 7 The vessels were found outside the slab stone box at Ban Wang Prachop site.

Figure 8 A bowl was found at Ban Wang Prachop site.



Figure 9 The polished stone axes were found at Ban Wang Prachop site.

Figure 10 Stone bracelets

According to the aforementioned evidences, it shows that slab box stone making was done in community or clan level because many slab stones must be moved to the ritual sites and the specialists in selecting, cracking, extracting, and polishing slab stones were required. According to the excavated evidence, there was no iron tools found except the polished axes which were only one tool found in every archeological site.

According to the thorough excavation in the slab box stones, no human remain was found. The soil getting from excavation were screened by the fine grid or put in the clothes and filtered in the water, but no human remain was found. The soil pH test also applied in order to find some bone ashes but the results always showed diluted acid.

From box no. 3, one of the slab box stones of Ban Wang Prachop, some traces of excavation that damaged almost half of the bottom of the box were found. The top of the box covered with many pieces of phyllite as same as every slab box stone. The traces of excavation showed that it was not from grave looting. According to the above evidences, it was possible that there might be some rituals associated with excavating the slab box stones for burying something but it could not be assumed that these rituals were associated with the primary burial or the secondary burial because no human remain was found.

Slab Lined

Apart from the slab box stones, the excavation in Ban Wang Prachop archeological site also found 3 lines of slab lined. The slab lined face to the north-eastern side in parallel with the slab box stone line. The slab lined lines are divided into 2 forms. The first one is in parallel with the slab box stone line. Two lines of 2-3 slab lined were found. Slab discs were found under the first line and the bowl-shaped pottery were found under the second line (Figure 11).



Figure 11 The first form of slab lined.

Figure 12 The second form of slab lined.

The second form was found at only one place. Two slabs lined 1.80 meters apart from each other. The way of lining was similar to the slab on the width of slab box stone. The potteries were buried under the slab and 4 stone bracelets in perfect condition were put overlapping intentionally at the space in the middle.

This slab lined was located on the southwestern part of the excavation site. They were lined with approximate gap of 250 centimeters. The way of lining can be interpreted in 2 ways. First, it might be some kind of sub-rituals. Second, it might relate to the status like the rich, the poor, or the gender of the builders.

Distribution of Evidences and Ritual Practices

Ritual is the common practice of the community which is accepted and performed by people in the society. They acknowledge the process, symbol system, meaning and sacred of such ritual. The slab box stones found in 2 sites, Ban Wang Prachop and Nai Sien archeological sites, show the common belief of people in this society. That is, choosing the specific areas for ritual practice separated from the habitation area as well as not far from the community. In term of ritual practice, slab box stone making and slab lined reflect the complexity of the existed belief system.

In term of devoting personal belongings to the slab box stone, it can be divided into 2 types. The first type is devotion by putting things in the boxes and the second type is putting them outside the boxes. Types of items were similar but their conditions were not. That is, the pottery, stone bracelets, and terracotta beads were found in the devotion by putting things in the boxes at Ban Wang Prachop while the pottery, round stone ornaments, stone bracelets, spindle whorls and quartz beads were found at Nai Sien. The quantity of these things was approximately the same which represents the similar status of people. Interestingly, the stone bracelets were broken intentionally and put in the box in incomplete condition. This practice might relate to some kinds of belief like the devotion of things to the dead during the burial and taking some pieces back for remembrance of the dead but the writer does not know about this case.

While putting things outside the boxes can be analyzed only at Ban Wang Prachop because it was excavated almost 100 percent. According to the distribution of the evidences, it was found that the areas in the middle and the southwestern part might be used for devotion and worship because they were empty spaces. The evidences found in this area were 15 groups of pottery. The direction of lining was relatively in order along the northeastern-southwestern. Most of the shapes of the pottery were the wide bowl with the base made by piece connecting technique (mold the body separately from the bottom and then connect them to each other). It should be noticed that most of the pottery found were broken stone bracelets and some of them can be put together completely. Moreover, the terracotta beads, stone beads and 4 polished axes were also found. These polished axes were used and their stone types and shapes were similar to those found in Ban Kang Hin and Ban Nong Rom archeological sites.

All of the evidences were classified as the same soil layer but 2 different periods because the levels of antique items found were slightly different. This evidence showed that after the slab box stones building, there were some worships for some period of time before leaving the area.

Chronology

Among all of the archeological sites, only Ban Wang Prachop archeological site can be scientifically dated by standard radio carbon-14. 2 specimens were sent to the Office of Atoms for Peace, Bangkok for carbon dating. The results showed that the first specimen (OAP2446) aged 2350 ± 260 years (BP) or 1,100 B.C to 400 A.D. by 2 sigma calculation which means that the possibility of accuracy is 95%. This specimen was found 20 centimeters under the soil surface together with the pottery, stone bracelets and polished axes.

The second specimen (OAP2447) aged 2520 ± 260 years or 1,200 B.C. to 300 A.D. (2 sigma). This specimen was found in the pole hole 26-36 centimeters under the soil surface. This pole hole was found in the soil layer of this culture.

It can be noticed that both specimens were found outside the boxes

because no organic matter was found except the pottery but they were not sent for carbon dating because of the limited budget. Only 4 specimens were found in the area outside the boxes, but 2 specimens were sent because they were the best and big.

According to the carbon dating, it is possible that Wang Prachop Culture is dated to around 2,500-2,300 years ago. The problem is 2,500 years ago was the Iron Age in Thailand in overall. As a result, it is uncertain whether these slab box stones were made by people in the Iron Age Culture or not.

Megalithic Culture in South East Asia

Considering from the features of slab box stones and slab lined at Ban Wang Prachop and Nai Sien, they can be classified in sub group of megalithic culture which are found throughout Asia. Only slab grave coffins and slab box stones were found in India, China, Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Even though the forms of slab box stones found in different sites are similar, when considering in details, the slab box stones of Ban Wang Prachop were very similar to those found in Taiwan, Indonesia, and Malaysia except for the stone types. More importantly, no human remain was found at Ban Wang Prachop.

Peinan culture was found on the southeastern of Taiwan during Neolithic period (around 1,500-800 B.C.). The unique characteristic of this culture is slate coffin making. The human remains were put in the coffins during the secondary burial. Some of the coffins were found with complete human remains, some were found with only one tooth. Inside the coffins, there were some grave goods such as polished axes, stone bracelets, beads, human-shaped locket, pottery, ling-ling O stone earrings and etc. for devotion to the dead. (Bellwood 1997: 215-217; Chin-yung 2000; Tsang 2000; Scarre 2005: 286-287; Yeh 2006)

One of the interesting evidences deriving from the excavation of Peinan archeological site is the tooth extraction ritual. According to Chao-mei Lien, the archeologist who did the excavation, this ritual was found in the south of China and Japan. In Thailand, it was found in Ban

Koa, Kanchanaburi Province and Non Nok Tha, Khon Kaen Province. The latter evidence might be the indirect one that represented the migration of group of people in the past between South East Asia and East Asia Regions.

Indonesia is classified in Iron Age. It related to slab grave coffin making as found in East Java as well as Bali, Sumbawa, Sumba except for Kuningan archeological site which is located in the western part of Java where no iron tools were found together with slab grave coffins. This remains a problem because it is not clearly verified whether any iron tools were found or not (Bellwood, 1997: 290). According to Agus Aris Munandar, the group of people who made dolmens had some relations with rice planting and worship culture. Dolmens were used in ancestor worship rituals (Munandar 2011).

Granite coffins were found in Malaysia on the mountains on the south of Perak near Bernam, Sungkai and Slim Rivers or in Changkat Menteri District. These coffins were made of many slabs sized 2 meters long (Heng 2000: 65-72). Calling these coffins “slab graved” creates some confusion because the excavation done in 1936 or later never found any human or animal remains (Jeshurun 1982: 102; Bulbeck 2004: 321). Inside the boxes, there were glass beads and carnelians, bronze bowls, iron tools, earthenware and etc. It can be classified in Iron Age aged 400 B.C. – mid 7 A.D. Glass beads and carnelians represented the distance trade connection with India and many labor forces were required, so they were the elites of this society (Heng 2000: 65-72).

Peter Bellwood assumed that coffin making rituals in Taiwan, Indonesia, and Malaysia were the cultural group relating to the migration of Austronesia-speaking people who originate in Taiwan. Later on, they migrated to archipelago zones like Indonesia, Peninsular Malaysia, and Malaysia respectively (Bellwood 1997: 215-217).

Discussion

There are 2 main problems of Wang Prachop Culture. Firstly, according to the carbon dating, Wang Prachop Culture aged around 2,500-2,300 years ago which was the Iron Age of many communities in Thailand

and other countries. But the evidences found in 4 archeological sites still used the polished stone axes as the common tools without any iron tools. According to the empirical evidence, Wang Prachop Culture should be classified in Neolithic period or Neolithic culture. But according to some traces of evidences like stone cracking trace, quartz beads including the dating value of Wang Prachop archeological site, it could be assumed that Wang Prachop Culture might be classified in Iron Age.

Secondly, considering the distance of the sites near Wang Prachop where the slab box stones or slab grave coffins were found, Wang Prachop Culture was relatively far from slab grave coffins and slab box stones culture found in other places. The nearest site was located on the south of Perak connecting with Selangor in Malaysia. Interestingly, there was also no burial in these slab box stones but they were in later period that is 2,000 years ago and can be classified in Iron Age (Jeshurun 1982: 102; Heng 2000: 67; Bullbeck 2004: 322).

The evidences that represented the relations between the slab box stones at Wang Prachop and Perak-Selangor were not enough but it could be assumed from chronology and technology that it was possible that there was another direction of migration that is from the western part of Thailand to the western part of Peninsular Malaysia. The direction of migration from the north to the south with the distance over 1,500 kilometers was represented by one of the important examples; Ban Kao culture. It was found that there was a migration from Kanchanaburi to Kuala Lumpur during 2,000-1,200 B.C. and the important evidence was the tripod pottery vessels (Bellwood 1993: 46-47).

The hypothesis that the group of people who built slab box stone culture in Chankat Menteri District spoke Austronesian language had weak supported evidence (Bellwood 1993) because according to the distribution of Austroasiatic language, Chankat Menteri District occupied by Senoi who were Austroasiatic- speaking. They were the original group before the migration of Austronesianspeaking ones. Therefore, this article proposes that Wang Prachop Culture might be associated with people who speak Austroasiatic language which is a widely spoken language throughout the

mainland and might be spread to the south of Malaysia.

Conclusion

Wang Prachop Culture is a culture with ritual practice of slab box stone making aged 2,500-2,300 years ago. According to the evidences found, it can be classified in Neolithic Period. The purpose of making these slab box stones is unclear but according to the ethnic information in Indonesia, they might be made on the purposes of ancestor worship or to be a medium for communicating with supernatural entities.

Wang Prachop Culture is a common megalithic cultural phenomenon found throughout East Asia as well as South East Asia (Kim 1982) aged 2,500-2,000 years ago. Some important questions still have no answer. For example, how slab box stone making phenomenon occurred and why people from various cultures shared common belief including the additional evidences for providing explanation of the migration line from the north to the south.

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