

Book Review

***Before Siam: Essays in Art and Archaeology,*
by Nicolas Revire and Stephen A. Murphy (eds.),
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Some fifty kilometers west of Bangkok lies Nakhon Pathom, a provincial town sprawled at the base of a magnificent Buddhist stupa, Phra Pathom Chedi. Periodically refurbished, the chedi looks to be of comparatively recent origin. It is not, or at least not in its entirety. A smaller version of the structure may already have been in place as early as the 5th century and between the 6th and 11th centuries, it was built up a-new, a sacred center of an expanding Mon Buddhist realm. Sometime in the 11th century it was overbuilt in the Khmer style, a reflection of the shifting political and demographic landscape. Another ‘make-over’ was organized in the mid-19th century at the behest of a Siamese ruler bent on ‘restoring’ the Buddhist heritage of his kingdom. When construction was completed in 1870, the stupa was the tallest in the land and from that time onwards, its maintenance was treated as a matter of ‘national’ importance.

Situated at the foot of the chedi, a national museum sheds light on the contemporary meanings associated with the site. An entryway exhibit offers an introduction to modern Nakhon Pathom and its three thousand-year-old history of human habitation. Principal exhibits focus upon the emergence and spread of both Dvaravati culture and Theravada Buddhism in the region, developments attributed to an influx of Indic influences that mixed with and reworked local beliefs and traditions. A final display brings visitors back to comparatively recent times, depicting the development of the town and its temples under the auspices of

Thai rulers in the late 19th century. A popular field trip destination for high-school students, the museum conveys the impression that Nakhon Pathom is Thailand's 'first city', a place where the Thai first took up the Buddhist beliefs and practices that sustained them from that time onward.

This is what comes of considering pre-history in a national context: an implicit affirmation of continuity between a particular past and the present; a proprietary use of ancient artifacts and archaeological evidence in historical accounts of modern places. Whatever the utility of such narratives in inflating local pride, they remain deeply problematic. In this instance, there is almost nothing to suggest that the Thai and 'Thainess' were at work in the region in ancient times; the former is a branch of a broader Tai ethno-linguist grouping that appears to have migrated into the region at a much later stage and the latter is an intellectual construct that comes into its own in the middle of last century. The ethnic identity – or more likely identities - of the people who first settled in Nakhon Pathom remains an open question. The Mon and Khmer are generally granted pride of place in the early period but the use of these ethnonyms has largely been dictated by a shifting distribution of cultural artifacts, artistic styles and epigraphy rather than by a knowledge of who actually lived in the region. Equally uncertain, although much better evidenced, is the local history of Buddhism. Its spread was obviously a multi-vector enterprise, a process involving both overland and maritime routes that were utilized by different groups at different times, and there is no way to know exactly when it left off being the business of mendicants and migrants and became instead the thoroughly localized affair. Nor is it particularly clear when or where the Thai made the belief system their own.

A far more insightful picture of mainland Southeast Asian pre-history emerges from new scholarship that studiously avoids the interpretive spin of contemporary nationalism. *Before Siam: Essays in Art and Archaeology*, the collaborative effort of some twenty-two primary contributors, intentionally turns away from a toponym that is now invariably linked to the evolution of a modern Thai nation-state, in order to consider the region's complex archaeological evidence on its own terms.

The eighteen essays contained in the work are less a single tale than a number of discreet narratives which ignore contemporary borders and concerns in order to build up a far more detailed and nuanced understanding of the peoples and processes that transformed mainland Southeast Asia in the first millennia of the current era. The basic outline of this story has long been surmised - wedged between the expanding civilizations of South and East Asia, the region was reshaped by migration and trade. The movements of peoples and merchandise, the extent of local agency in regional development, the scope of exchange, the emergence and nature of local production centers, the rise of early polities and the spread and development of artistic styles and belief systems have long remained matters for further investigation.

Before Siam is the most sophisticated and comprehensive effort to date to address such questions, a point well-made by Chris Baker in his preface to the work. Jointly published by River Books and the Siam Society, it is also an exceptionally attractive volume, printed on high-quality paper and rich with maps and color plates.