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Discovery of a Mesolithic burial near the painted rock-shelter of Ban Tha Si (Lampang province, Northern Thailand): Implications for regional mortuary practices

Découverte d'une sépulture mésolithique sous l'abri-sous-roche orné de Ban Tha Si (province de Lampang, Nord de la Thaïlande) : implications régionales sur l'évolution des pratiques funéraires

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ABSTRACT

Although the oldest Neolithic cultures in eastern Asia have for the most part been documented in China and Vietnam, a large number of Early Metal Age sites have been reported in northeastern Thailand. On the other hand, the Hoabinhian, principally identified by its characteristic unifacial tools, is known throughout the Late Pleistocene up until 3000 BP and is spread across the whole of continental Southeast Asia. The chronology of Hoabinhian lithic assemblages is still poorly documented and burials from the period are scarce and often do not provide enough information to allow the evolution of regional mortuary practices to be investigated. Here we describe a burial dated to 7047 ± 53 BP found associated with a Hoabinhian stone tool assemblage and fauna near the painted rock-shelter of Ban Tha Si. This discovery provides important new chrono-cultural information for continental Southeast Asia, especially with regard to changing regional mortuary practices.

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R É S U M É

Alors que les cultures du Néolithique ancien d'Asie orientale ont essentiellement été décrites en Chine et au Vietnam, les cultures de l'Âge des Métaux ont abondamment été documentées dans le Nord-Est de la Thaïlande. Par ailleurs, le Hoabinhien, principalement identifié par ses outils unifaciaux caractéristiques, est connu du Pléistocène tardif jusque vers 3000 BP sur l'ensemble du Sud-Est asiatique continental. La chronologie des assemblages lithiques hoabinhiens reste encore peu documentée et les sépultures de cette période

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sont rares et ne procurent ainsi que peu d'information permettant de suivre l'évolution des pratiques funéraires. Nous décrivons ici une sépulture inédite qui a été datée de 7047 ± 53 BP et qui est associée à un assemblage lithique hoabinhien dans l'abri-sous-roche orné de Ban Tha Si. Cette découverte apporte des informations chronoculturelles nouvelles pour l'Asie du Sud-Est continental et permet de dresser un premier panorama de l'évolution des pratiques funéraires de cette période.

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1. Introduction

Cave and rock-shelter paintings have been known for some time in Thailand (Kerr, 1924; Lunet de Lajonquière, 1912), and numerous new sites have been discovered and documented in the last 30 years. Painted figures belonging to different styles and periods have been identified in various regions, including the coastal areas of southern Thailand (Chaimongkol, 1988), the western part of central Thailand (provinces of Uthai Thani and Kanchanaburi) (Srisuchat, 1989, 1990, 1991), the North-East (provinces of Loei, Nakhon Ratchasima, Khon Kaen, Udon Thani and Ubon Ratchathani) (Charoenwongsa, 1988; Srisuchat, 1992), and northern Thailand (provinces of Hot, Chiang Mai, and Lam-pang) (Pautreau and Doy-Asa, 2005; Pautreau et al., 1996; Sidisunthorn et al., 2006; Srongsiri and Sangchan, 1997). Geometric forms, different types of animal representations (wild and domesticated), tools, boats, landscape and hunting scenes, hands and anthropomorphic figures have all been documented. Apart from modern scenes such as the Chinese junk from Phi Phi Island or white animal outlines, prehistoric rock art in Thailand mostly dates from the Iron Age and is associated with sedentary societies (Higham, 2002). Figures are usually painted in red ochre, such as at the Pha Taem rock-shelter in northeastern Thailand near the Mekong River, where figures of fishes, fish-traps, geometric forms, hands, deer in rice fields, and an elephant have all been recorded. At Khao Chan Ngam in the Nakhon Ratchasima region, anthropomorphic figures are present alongside cattle and dogs, whereas at the sites of Ban Yang Thong Tai near Doi Saket and at Ob-Luang cliff (Prisanchit and Pengtako, 1984; Santoni et al., 1988, 1990) in the province of Chiang Mai, red paintings depict both wild and domesticated animals. The largest painted rock-shelter in northern Thailand is that of Phratu Pha in Lampang province (Srongsiri and Sangchan, 1997). Although directly correlating the chronology of the paintings with associated human occupations or burials may be difficult, the occurrence of several burials at the base of Phratu Pha painted

rock-shelter (Kongsuwan, 2001; Srongsiri and Sangchan, 1997; Winayalai, 1999) dated to about 3000 BP prompted us to undertake excavations at Ban Tha Si because it depicts red painted hands and figures of animals. These new excavations uncovered a single individual buried in a flexed position associated with a series of radiocarbon dates (Table 1), indicating that the rock-shelter of Ban Tha Si was occupied for a significant duration.

2. Materials and methods

The site of Ban Tha Si was found during our surveys in the eastern cliffs of the Doi Pha Kan Mountains, 10 km south of the famous rock art site of Phratu Pha (Fig. 1, district of Mae Moh, Lampang province, N $18^\circ 26.55'$ E $99^\circ 45.98'$). Excavations at the site were undertaken in collaboration with the Northern Archaeological Center of Chiang Mai University, the Department of Archaeology of Silpakorn University, and the 6th office of Fine Arts Department of Nan. Red painted figures of hands, an elephant and a sun-bear (Fig. 2) were recorded exclusively on the eastern slopes of the mountain, as is also the case at nearby Phratu Pha. A total of 48 stone tools, five potsherds and one cowrie were uncovered from a survey of the rock-shelter. An initial 5 m by 1 m trench, excavated at the base of the elephant painting, produced only four stone tools near the surface. It is clear from this trench that the site has been heavily eroded, and the bedrock now lays only 5 to 10 cm below the present surface of the rock-shelter. The deposits are composed of fine aeolian sediments covering the eroded surface of the limestone substratum. Excavations undertaken under the southern overhang of the rock-shelter indicated that the preserved deposits could be divided into two distinct stratigraphic units: an upper layer composed of a fine aeolian sediment, and a 2 to 20 cm thick layer consisting of a combination of the overlying fine sediment and small angular limestone gravels derived from the erosion of the underlying calcareous substrate. The irregular surface of the lower level is due to the erosion of the underlying limestone substratum. The excavations produced 10 cobbles or cobble fragments, 194 flakes, 20 chunks, 44 stone tools (scrapers, denticulated pieces, retouched flakes, *limaces*) and 85 sherds (<0.5 cm wide) of black cord-impressed ceramics; all archaeological remains were recovered exclusively from the lower layer. Small faunal remains ($n = 105$, bone fragments, shell and chitin) demonstrate the presence of crabs, land snails, and aquatic molluscs, as well as turtles, varanids, snakes, cercopithecids, muntjak, suids, and an unidentified large bovid. A single burial has also been documented and the original position of the body determined using techniques

Table 1

Radiocarbon dates from Ban Tha Si rock-shelter.

Tableau 1

Datation radiocarbone des échantillons prélevés dans l'abri-sous-roche de Ban Tha Si.

Nature	Date #	^{14}C age (BP)	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$ (‰, VPDB)
Charcoal	Wk 29559	7664 ± 30	-27.4
Charcoal	Wk 29560	$11,393 \pm 36$	-28.9
Charcoal	Wk 29561	8621 ± 33	-26.9
Charcoal	Wk 29562	$10,637 \pm 35$	-25.8
Charcoal	Wk 29563	6673 ± 25	-26.2
Bone	AA 92549	7047 ± 53	-16.8

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