

**IDENTIFICATION**

**Nomination** : Ban Chiang Archaeological Site  
**Location** : Province of Udon Thani  
**State Party** : Thailand  
**Date** : 28 September 1990

**DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY**

Until the 1960s, south-east Asia was considered to have been a culturally backward area in prehistory. The generally accepted view was that its cultural development resulted from external influences, principally from China to the north and India to the west. Recent archaeological work at Nok Nok Tha and, later, Ban Chiang on the Khorat plateau of north-east Thailand has demonstrated this view to be incorrect: this area of modern Thailand has been shown by excavation and field survey to have been the centre of an independent, and vigorous, cultural development in the 4th millennium BC which shaped contemporary social and cultural evolution over much of south-east Asia and beyond, into the Indonesian archipelago.

Settlement of the Khorat plateau began around 3600 BC. The settlers came from the neighbouring lowlands, bringing with them a hunter-gatherer economy that was beginning to develop sedentary farming, with domesticated cattle, pigs, and chickens and an elementary form of dry-rice cultivation. The settled village life of this Early Period at Ban Chiang lasted until c. 1000 BC. Agricultural methods were refined and improved, along with other skills such as house construction and pottery manufacture. The equipment of burials reflects an increasing social complexity. Of especial importance was the growing use of bronze, for weapons and personal ornament in the earlier phase but spreading to more utilitarian applications in the later phases.

The Middle Period (1000-500/300 BC) was notable for the introduction of wet-rice farming, as evidenced by the presence of waterbuffalo bones, and technological developments in ceramic and metal production. It was a period of considerable prosperity, as shown by the grave-goods, and one which saw the introduction of iron into common use.

In the Late Period (500/300 BC-AD 200/300) there was further social and technological development, especially in ceramic design and production. Although occupation appears to have ended at Ban Chiang in the 3rd century AD, at other sites in the region, such as Non Maung and Ban Prasat, settlement was continuous into the 16th century and later.

Ban Chiang is considered to have been the principal settlement in this area of the Khorat plateau and has given its name to a distinctive archaeological culture. Scores of contemporary sites have been discovered in the region, at several of which excavations have been carried out. The prehistoric settlement lies beneath the modern village of Ban Chiang (established by Laotian refugees in the late 18th century). It is a low oval mound some 500m by 1.3km. Only very limited excavation has been possible in the settlement site, but this has established the existence of deep stratification and long cultural continuity.

The main excavations have taken place on the perimeter of the modern village, where a large number of burials from all three periods, with rich ceramic and metal grave-goods, have been revealed and recorded. One of the excavations has been preserved for public viewing, with a permanent cover building; there is an excellent site museum in another part of the village.

### **AUTHENTICITY**

There can be no doubt about the authenticity of the preserved remains at Ban Chiang. However, the problems associated with the long-term preservation in situ of the archaeological excavation pits and of the remains may result in due course in the replacement of original by replica elements (see "Conservation" below).

### **MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION**

#### **Legislation and administration**

The site is protected by the general Thai antiquities legislation of 1961 and by Executive Council Decree in 1972 specific to Ban Chiang. Most of the modern village is privately owned, but the Royal Thai Government has eminent domain. There is an absolute ban on any form of excavation in the village without authorization.

The famous red-on-buff pottery of Ban Chiang became collectors' items in the 1960s, and much unlicensed and destructive digging took place. The village community has now learned the cultural importance of the site (and also its commercial

potential in attracting tourists, for whom villagers are providing facilities), and as a result they are now zealous in preventing any form of pillaging. According to the Archaeology Division of the Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Education, whose 7th Regional Office is directly responsible for the management of Ban Chiang, looting has now ceased. Officials also estimate that the major portion of the site area has not been touched.

### **Conservation**

The unexcavated part of the prehistoric settlement is intact and there is little threat to any part of it (see above).

The excavation pit open to the public presents a number of conservation problems. Although the cover building is well designed, the presence of mineral salts in skeletal material and metal objects will inevitably lead to further deterioration unless preventive techniques are applied; these are currently the subject of study. Perhaps of greater importance is the need to stabilize the sides of the main trench and the subsidiary sections within it against the impact of soil and ground water. There is a danger that the use of impermeable sealants may result in catastrophic collapse at some future date.

### **EVALUATION**

#### **Qualities**

Ban Chiang is without question the most important prehistoric settlement so far discovered in south-east Asia. Within its cultural sequence of some four millennia it presents the earliest evidence for true farming in the region and for the manufacture and use of metals. It is, moreover, not merely the type-site for this prehistoric culture: its long cultural sequence, size, and economic status has no parallel in any other contemporary site in the region.

#### **Additional comments**

Ban Chiang presents the World Heritage Committee with a challenge. Prehistoric monuments so far inscribed on the List cover upstanding remains (eg Stonehenge/Avebury, Mesa Verde), rock art (eg Kakadu, Tassili n'Ajjer), and excavated settlements (eg Mohenjodaro). In the case of Ban Chiang, the material evidence is in the form of limited excavation trenches, the main body of cultural material being preserved relatively intact beneath the modern village.

There is a limited number of key prehistoric sites of this type around the world. A strong case can be made for their outstanding universal significance in terms of human cultural,

social, and/or economic evolution, yet they present few, if any, surviving surface features. Of the criteria listed in paragraph 24 of the Operational Guidelines, criterion iii would seem to be directly applicable in such cases, in, some instances in conjunction with criterion vi. Ban Chiang is a test-case for monuments of this kind. Its acceptance would undoubtedly widen the catchment area of the World Heritage List, giving a more flexible interpretation of "site" as defined in Article 1 of the 1972 Convention.

It is difficult to estimate the likely number of candidates for inscription that might result from the introduction of this new interpretation, but in the opinion of ICOMOS it is unlikely to exceed a score worldwide.

### **ICOMOS RECOMMENDATION**

That this cultural property be included on the World Heritage List on the basis of criterion III.

- **Criterion iii** : Ban Chiang was the centre of a remarkable phenomenon of human cultural, social, and technological evolution in the 5th millennium BC, which occurred independently in this area of south-east Asia and spread widely over the whole region.

ICOMOS, 14 November 1992