

INDO-IRANIAN AND PERSIAN CHARACTERISTICS IN THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF CAMBODIA AND THAILAND

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Abstract

Contemporary academic studies and recent discoveries in archaeological sites of Southeast Asia, have brought forward indications in support of a tentative hypothesis, regarding the penetration of cultural streams and various other elements of ancient Indo-European civilizations in an "Indo-Iranian context" in Southeastern zone of Asian continent since circa the first millennium BC. This study is, thus, an argument in support of those studies and discoveries, which in a broader context, signify an impact of Persian civilization farther East in the so called Monogolid ethno-cultural zone, where the pre-Islamic phases of Iran had probably become established via diffusion and integration of Iranic factors, whose presence in Southeast Asia is symbolized in the literary as well as cultural, and cosmological spheres of indigenous cultures, whose various traditions at different times, assimilated notions and other heritages from remnants of Indo-Iranian world, most notably in Cambodia and Thailand's Siamese phases. Moreover, this argument is a new approach and interpretation of those academic studies by specialists, whose research plans is identifiable with field work, such as this hypothesis, which is based on my field research in Thailand and Cambodia from 1993 to 2001.

I. Indo-European Factors in Antiquity of Southeast Asia

Studies relating to origins of antiquated civilization in Southeast of Asian continent are diverse in theories and conclusions. Various arguments for and against an impact of Indo-European cultures have been provided, and most of these are identifiable with an 'Indo-Iranian' epoch, and its cultural context in regard to empirical archaeological

findings of metal phase of Southeast Asia, whose primary elements lie in the so called 'Dong-Son' epoch of circa fifth century BC, and more often than not, this important metal age, recalls theories by renown scholars such as historian Robert Heine-Geldern (Smith & Watson, 1979), and C. Jacques as well as E. Poree-Maspero, on a Scythian impact in very ancient Southeast Asia (Mabbet & Chandler, 1995). Heine-Geldern's thesis, which is

supported by art historians (Richter, 2000), has provided a basis for those studies, which support arguments, suggesting diffusion of artistic styles, and scientific ideas, and crafts and architectural symbols of early Indo-European tribes, whose arrival in Sinicized Asia can be identified with pre-Christian eras, and whose cultural streams can be looked for in the Indic cultural phases, ranging from Northwest India and the Naga cultural phase of Myanmar and that in peninsular regions of Malayo-Indonesian ethno-cultural zones (Smith & Watson, 1979). The significance of Heine-Geldern's hypotheses is focused on Metal Age of Southeast Asia, whose primary blossom had occurred in Northern Vietnam at the site of 'Dong-Son', a culture that was in position of exerting an sphere beyond Vietnamese territory as far as Cambodia, and Thailand (Richter, 2000). Moreover, that a famous archaeological expedition headed by Mallaret had referred to probable Iranian elements in the bronze age culture of 'Dong-Son', and assigned to 'Luristan' (Smith & Watson, 1979). It is likely that an Iranian cultural phase in the development and enrichment of metal age in Southeast Asia had become probable via an 'Indo-Iranian' intermediary, whose penetration in Southeast Asia can be connected to a Southeast Asian phase inside China, where tribal confederations of Indo-Chinese cultural orientation had lived in the Shizhaishan, situated in Southern Chinese borders. At that site, Heine-Geldern had identified a relationship between Sinitic arts of Chou dynasty (1122-221), and assimilated Scythian elements in stylized animal motifs, whose notions could be identified in the lifestyle aspects of Southeast Asiatic tribes residing under the sphere of Chou in Yunnan Province near Lake Dian. The Dian kingship possessed a decorative art, that is said to identify with 'Dong-Son' metal age culture of Northern Vietnam (Richter, 2000), most notably in relation to bronze drums of Shizhaishan (Smith & Watson, 1979).

II. Manifestations of Indo-Iranic Sphere in Vietnam-based Cambodian Culture

Our present knowledge indicates that during the

first century AD a kingship had suddenly become established in the delta of the Mekong in Southeast Asia, whose political power-base, was situated within the region of Vietnam, and whose dynastic tradition was known to the Chinese kingdom as 'Funan' (Snidwongs, 1991). Funan's expansion was gradual and in not too distant future the frontiers of this kingship stretched to other areas in nearby Champa, and Cambodia as well as city-states and island nations in the Gulf of Siam, and by the third century, Funanese navy and other ships were moving into Thailand's Chandaburi and the Chao Phraya Valley, and thence, into the Malay Peninsula at Tun-sun, another Chinese name for a confederation of sultans, where other self-ruling states included Chin-Chin, and Tu- K'un, and Chu-li, and P'an P'an, and Chi-Tu, and Lang-Ya-Sia, all Sinicized names preserved in Chinese texts, whose political sphere was under the impact of Funan, the greater kingship of Southeast Asia (Snidwongs 1991). But, as much as Funan was an indigenous kingship, its origin is very much obscure, but oral traditions and other legends, that are retained in the literary traditions of Southeast Asian peoples, can be interpreted to indicate a role by 'Indo-Iranian' peoples, or influences that were introduced by them during the formation or transformation of Funan since the first century of the Christian era, especially the role of a Brahman warrior, who had entered in Funan, and had consequently, married with the local chief's princess beauty (Burling, 1992). Later records, and inscriptions identified with Funan, have been interpreted to indicate some close links with the Scythians, who had become Indianized inside Indian borders in the kingship of the Murunda (Chakravarti, 1995). The interpretation of authorities on probable 'Indo-Iranian' influences in Funan includes a description of 'Chandan', a Sanskrit term, which is transliteration from a Chinese term designating the title of a king of Funan in 357 AD (Coedes, 1987), and this can suggest an Indo-Scythian presence in that kingship. Moreover, references to artistic tastes of Funanese craftsmen, and artisans has attached to it, use of forms and techniques applied in iconographic

motifs, whose uses beyond Funan, has been identified in the early Khmer cultural phase of Cambodia, especially in regard to production of Khmer statues (Hall, 1985), and these Cambodian statues are said to reflect a 'Funano-Iranian' artistic sphere in Surya images, and art forms visible on cylindrical tunics of Vishnu images, which via comparison with Pallava arts, can recall to art historians other statues whose production designs can suggest derivation of ideas from Pahlava culture, whose ethno-cultural origins was associated with Parthians, a Saka-based culture, whose people observed sun-worship, and whose immigrant tribes in unison with an Indic religious cult, became visible in Southeast Asia as 'Shaka-brahmana' (Coedes, 1983). The gradual decline of Funan, and its fall after the sixth century AD, created a power vacuum in the region, and at that stage the strongest societies nearby created Chenla kingship of Lao cultural phase, and then the Khmers who created Kambuja, or Cambodia (Rawson, 1967).

III. Other Indo-Iranian Elements in Khmer and Thai Cultures

As indicated earlier, Funan had contacts with a kingship called Murunda, which was actually situated in the Ganges valley, and a Funanese embassy to this Indic state had received gifts, where Yeuh-chih horses were, which is Chinese description of Indo-Scythian horses, which also indicates the cultural orientation of the Murunda. Furthermore, that a trade route had existed between the Ganges and Funanese ports and regions that extended into the Malay Peninsula as far as Chia-Ying, a city-state of the Malay zone, which recalls reference to a trade of Yuezhi horses there too (Smith & Watson, 1979), which can suggest a presence of 'Indo-Iranian' merchants and settlers in Southeast Asian harbour-cities during the third century (Hall, 1985). These trade routes, included other goods such as sugar, textiles, and other products which were shipped from harbours in the Ganges valley sites and extending into the Indian Ocean and other zones, as these inter-peninsular maritime trades

were recorded in Buddhist texts (Ray, 1994), and can help us recall that 'Indo-Iranian' aspects to Buddhism, has also been noted in the area of Vietnam via arrival of Indo-Scythian and Sogdian Buddhists there since the first and end of second centuries AD (Nguyen, 1993), and then again as late as the seventh century (Taylor, 1983). Let us examine the horse trading aspect further, by referring to a record which suggests that horses which were exported into Cambodia and the Malay Peninsula, were being sent from Central Asian trading posts in Qandahar, Afghanistan, and we know that a Chinese ambassador to Funan of the third century, had recorded that there were Kushan and Yuezhi merchants in the waterways and ports of Southeast Asia (Ray, 1994).

Cambodian inscriptions which are dated to the seventh century AD, show Sanskrit writings, that can suggest Indic influences, and worship practices by the cult of Pashupata in Khmer territory, as mentioned in an inscription of 624, with regard to Shiva worship, which focused on asceticism of a priesthood or followers whose disciples were distributed also in Mathura, Khotan and Afghanistan since the fourth and as late as the seventh century (Smith & Watson, 1979).

Other 'Indo-Iranian' notions in Cambodia can be searched for in their customs relating to funerals, as these were variantly observed, and a combination of two types of it was centred on abandoning the dead to vultures and burning of bones (Burling, 1992). Known as "bird burial", this funerary custom, was practiced also in Thailand (Bowring, 1969), and in a Southern Siamese region, near the Malay zone at Pattani (Marrison, 1985). John Bowring, who had witnessed the Thai version, had compared it to the Parsi custom of Zoroastrians in India (Bowring 1967). It is highly probable that this custom was assimilated in Cambodian Buddhism as its practice extended into the Angkor age of Khmer kingships in the thirteenth century, and we hear of it in nineteenth century Cambodia as well (Burling 1992). My own studies in Cambodia have persuaded me to hypothesize that the ancient name of this

country as 'Kambuja', may be connectable to 'Kambuijeh', Persian rendering of Grecian name of Cambyses, early Achaemenid king of Persia. This name and the burial custom of the Khmers are two Iranian factors that via the pre-Islamic phase of Persia, can be linked to Southeast Asia. Thus, we are dealing with Zoroastrian-based elements in Cambodia and Thailand. Another focus is on a Persian festival of Sasanian Period (226-651 AD), celebrated during the reign of King Pirouz in the fifth century, called 'Jashn-e- Abrizan'. Apparently, there are Thai and Cambodian festivals akin to it, whose Siamese one is called 'Songkran', observed on the 13th day of April (Setudeh-Nejad, 1997). Abrizan was a Persian rite whose celebration is well documented in relation to Sasanian era, when Persia was afflicted with seven years of droughts (Torabi, 1993), after which abundant rainfalls had brought 'Abrizgan', and a recent study indicates that such water-splashing festivals also exist in Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia (Setudeh-Nejad, 1997). During research in Cambodia in 1996, I became aware of 'Sangkran', and further studies brought to light a ninth century rite of 'holi' in India (Prangwatthanakun, 1996). Coedes, has suggested that reference in Cambodian inscriptions to priesthood of 'Shaka-brahmana', who were probably serving the Khmer courts, may suggest a Mithraic element there from an earlier union of sun-worship and Brahmanic ideas in Central-Asia and Northern Indian regions (Coedes, 1983). We know that Khmer influences were strong in Thailand via transmission of cosmic ceremonies at the courts, even after the fall of Funan (Setudeh-Nejad, 1999), at a time when Siam was under the impact of its Dvaravati phase, a name of Sanskrit origin which means "that which has gates" (Diffloth, 1984), which also recalls that via usage of Sanskrit-based alphabets, both Thailand and Cambodia are related to an 'Indo-Iranian' cultural sphere of early Indo-Europeans (Jean, 1992). Indeed, Thailand's Dvaravati phase has Persian elements attached to it in the discovery of Sasanian ceramic shards, and

pre-Dvaravati connections, which includes finds of fifth century Sasanian coins in Pattani area, and we can argue that Persia's sphere in peninsular zones of maritime commerce then was significant. Thailand is a rich cultural base in Southeast Asia, whose cultural heritage has rare examples in regard to assimilation of Persian notions in arts, and culture, notably of Sasanian epoch (Setudeh-Nejad, 1998). Other notions adopted by the Siamese folks, includes ideas from Persian pottery in designs which were retained since after the eighth until the eleventh centuries AD (Di Crocco, 1987), and fascinating reflections of these Persian-based adoptions that have been recognized in later centuries of Thai arts, from the thirteenth century decorations reaching Thailand through Burmese territory in ceramic wares (Di Crocco, 1990). These assimilated doctrines and notions, can further indicate that Siam's culture has shared much interface with an 'Indo-Iranian' phase of Persia as well, in the cosmic context of assimilated notions of mythical orientation (Setudeh-Nejad, 1996). The combined elements of pre-Islamic and Islamic-age Persia, found in Thai sites, can suggest to us that Persian culture spread to Thailand in different times, as shards of Sasanian wares have been found in various regions of Thailand in Southern area of Laem Pho in Surat Thani Province and at Ko Kao Khao, and are said to be similar to others found in Central Thailand in sites such as Lopburi and U Thong, estimated to belong to eighth and ninth century AD. Virginia Di Crocco, a ceramics authority who is based in Bangkok has suggested that a metal artifact discovered in North of Thailand at Phayao, has a Sasanian motif showing a bird, and has said that its style recalls another one retained on a silver bowl of the sixth century, being kept at the Tehran Museum (Di Crocco, 1987). Moreover, Di Crocco, has identified other Iranian elements in Thai arts, especially in techniques and motifs used in Phayao and Sankamphaeng of Northern Thailand kilns, said to be akin to arts of Seljuk Persia (Di crocco, 1990).

CONCLUSION

It seems that, at various periods of its historical developments, Southeast Asia has received diverse cultural elements reaching her shores from the direction of Indo-Iranian zones of maritime trade. The Siamese culture of modern Thailand and Khmer culture of Cambodia have each in their own respective regions, shared interface and close encounters with combined heritages of Persian Gulf, Mesopotamian waterways reaching into the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean zones of Silk Road routes, both sea and land, that via the Malay Peninsula and Bay of Bengal, welcomed regional trades and entry of immigrants. Discovery of Sasanian, and Mediterranean and Indic crafts in Vietnamese zone is an indication of ship routes that linked Vietnam, Siam and Cambodia with the ancient Indo-Europeans (Richter, 2000). Despite the advent of Islam since the seventh century, indigenous aspects of Persia, via Sasanian arts persisted to reach farther East, especially to Ayutthaya phase of Thailand in the fourteenth century AD, and later on when Sheikh Ahmad of Qoum (Ghom) immigrated to Thailand, and Persian Muslims opened a new chapter in the history of cultural exchange (Setudeh-Nejad, 1999), and other ethno-cultural bonds and kinship, which were created between civilizations of West, and Southeast Asia, in which Thailand and Cambodia are two distinct high cultures, whose background has obtained impetus from a profound Sinicized phase of Funan, but also the Scythian phase of an 'Indo-Iranian epoch' in Southeast Asia.

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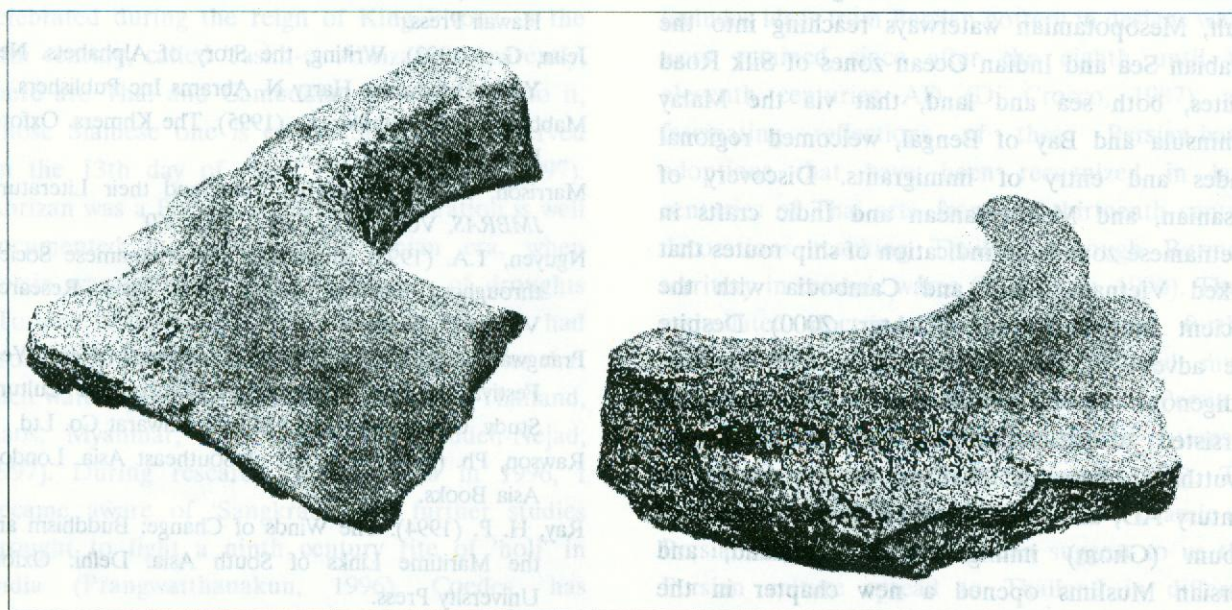
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COURTESY: Virginia M.Di Crocco

Sasanian shard with Turquoise glaze from Dvaravati period strata, Lopburi 8th-9th AD