

Earthwatch *Origins of Angkor* Expedition to Ban Non Wat  
Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Thailand 4-17 January 2010

ARPA SE Asia and Pacific Fieldwork Prize – Denise Hope 203150295

Ban Non Wat is a rural archaeological site in north eastern Thailand. The current *Origins of Angkor* excavation is in its third year, under the stewardship of Dr Nigel Chang of James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland. This current excavation follows from many seasons (2002-2007) led by Professor Charles Higham of Otago University, New Zealand. The site of Ban Non Wat was a moated settlement during the prehistoric, as identified by aerial photography in 1999-2000. It lies in the transition zone between the low-lying flood plain of the Mun River, land that is excellent for rice growing, and the very gently rising landscape. Transitions from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age and the Iron Age have been traced at this well-stratified site, with almost 700 human burials having been uncovered during the many seasons of excavation.

I had the honour of participating this field season as an Earthwatch volunteer, and with the welcome assistance of the University of New England ARPA Southeast Asia and Pacific Fieldwork Prize. Nine other volunteers and I arrived in Phimai from Bangkok on 4 January 2010 for a two week adventure. We were met by approximately twenty other researchers, already present and involved in the excavations. Each day we travelled from the town of Phimai about 40 minutes to the village of Ban Non Wat. Many of the Ban Non Wat villagers were also employed on the dig, with many being very experienced excavators following many seasons of digging in their village. Upon arrival we learned that this season there were four 4x4m trenches open, three at Ban Non Wat and one at a smaller nearby village, Ban Salao, the first season this new site had been excavated.

Each day the volunteers were assigned different duties, that may have included assisting in trench excavation, data base management, site surveying or cleaning, photographing and sorting of artefacts. The artefacts, from this current season and previous seasons, included many pottery sherds, and a number of reconstructions were conducted by the more experienced and patient volunteers. There were many pottery spindle whorls and lots of jewellery fragments, made of stone, bone, shell and metal. These required careful cleaning with dental tools, to often remove concretions built up during the centuries of burial. Many of the metal artefacts on site, from this season and previous, had been thought to be bronze, from Bronze and Iron Age contexts, but recent PXRF analysis has revealed that the metal artefacts are most likely just copper-containing.

Bone artefacts required very careful cleaning, as there was deliberately worked bone uncovered, plus many animal bones, some with evidence of butchery practices. The human remains from this and previous seasons were housed in Phimai at the 'Bone House'. Several researchers and volunteers were involved in the daily cleaning, recording and assessment of the human bone remains under the supervision of Dr Kate Domett, senior lecturer in anatomy at James Cook University. My one day at 'Bone House' was very enjoyable, as we cleaned the entire skeleton and reassembled

the cranium of a young adult that had died with third molars partially erupted and some signs of pathology on the skeleton.

Quite a few of us volunteers were archaeology students and the dig allowed for putting into practice many of the activities of an archaeology site previously theorised during university study. The time spent in the trenches (figure 1, below) was valuable, to not only be at the trowel edge of excavation, but also to witness the handling of the artefacts as they were removed from spits or contexts, to observe the recording of the different features as the trenches slowly grew deeper each day and to listen to the ongoing discussions on the different soil layers, cuts, features and intrusions as they unfolded. I was also involved in a total station topographical survey of the floor surface of one of the 4x4m trenches, through which an ancient drainage channel had been dug.



Figure 1: the author, excavating Iron Age post holes

I was heavily involved for a week of my volunteer time surveying the village of Ban Salao, located about 15 minutes from Ban Non Wat, and the site of prehistoric and modern salt making facilities. This village also appeared to be a mound site and the question was whether it lay on the transition between the low lying flood plains and higher ground, as with the Ban Non Wat village. No evidence of prehistoric moats exists at Ban Salao however. The survey, using a total station, involved many days traipsing through rice paddies and around the village (figure 2, below), negotiating with locals for access to yards and avoiding unfriendly dogs. Our efforts resulted in a topographical map of the locale being created, helping to aid interpretation of this new site area and to plan future research.

As volunteers on this archaeology expedition we had the unique privilege of experiencing the friendly and accommodating nature of the Thai people, working side

by side with the rural villagers in their small community. A community centre has been constructed in Ban Non Wat, near the original excavation site, storing some of the artefacts and with educational presentations for visiting school children and members of this and surrounding communities.



Figure 2: the author, surveying the village of Ban Salao

Each evening back in Phimai, following our day's volunteer work, the staff and volunteers would share a dinner and then one of the researchers would present to the group on their area of research. This was both interesting and informative, with Dr Nigel Chang presenting several times on different aspects of his Ban Non Wat research, which focuses on the prehistoric jewellery recovered from the many human burials. Even more valuable than all the practical experience, in my opinion, was the opportunity to meet other academics, archaeologists and an anatomist, other students of archaeology and many higher degree candidates. They stemmed from a diverse range of universities, including University of New England, James Cook University, Macquarie University, Otago University, University of Madison-Wisconsin and Durham University. As a distance student for many years this opportunity to discuss research interests, career paths and topics of interest with like-minded people was fantastic.

By my departure, on 17 January 2010, none of the trenches had excavated down to the Bronze Age levels where human burials were expected, although the burials were anticipated in the coming weeks. One interesting find during my time however, was the uncovering of a dog burial complete with grave goods (figure 3, below). The age was suspected as late Iron Age and the animal had been carefully buried with at least two pottery bowls to accompany them, with one paw tucked around one of the bowls.



Figure 3: late Iron Age dog burial with grave goods

I am grateful to UNE and the Archaeology and Palaeoanthropology department for bestowing upon me the inaugural ARPA Southeast Asia and Pacific Fieldwork Prize, allowing me to undertake valuable fieldwork experience in a wonderful location, prior to commencement of my Honours research this year. This volunteer experience with Earthwatch in Ban Non Wat was both educational, informative and a whole lot of fun.